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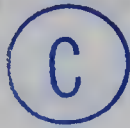
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FANTASY AND UNITY IN THE NOVELS OF VIRGINIA WOOLF

by



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A Thesis

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The undersigned certify that they have read and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance, a thesis entitled Fantasy and Unity in the Novels of Virginia Woolf, submitted by Carol Burnham in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

ABSTRACT

There are few studies of the writings of Virginia Woolf that are concerned with her both as a serious novelist and as a fantasist. Most critics, in fact, either underplay or completely ignore the extent to which she used fantasy, and the effect it has on the novels. It is with this knowledge in mind that I undertake the present study, my thesis being that there is an integral relationship between the technique of fantasy and the serious themes of the novels.

I have chosen the five novels which establish the five chapters of the thesis as examples of her work in its maturity. The novels I have omitted would not, I feel, have contributed to the thesis significantly. I deal with the novels chronologically, but it will be found that this treatment reveals important developments in the themes and technical aspects.

In Chapter One Mrs. Dalloway sets the trends which will be maintained in all the other novels. The metaphysical theme emerges as a quest for an absolute definable only in the vaguest of terms. This quest, however, is also expressed in the novel by the technique of fantasy. In Chapter Two the nature of this metaphysical reality becomes clearer in the symbolic meaning of the lighthouse. The common denominator to all the

metaphysical implications of the novels is "the summing up process" or unification process which the characters always seem to experience. To the Lighthouse also reveals that fantasy is integrally connected with Virginia Woolf's knowledge of this unity she sought, and also with her knowledge that the unity was evading her grasp.

Orlando forms the structural centre of the thesis; the other novels studied move towards and away from it thematically and technically. Orlando reveals, first of all, how the fantastic elements of the novels are ultimately serious, and also, how the trend towards metaphysics obliterates itself in the equally strong trend towards a fantastic world.

The Waves is usually regarded as Virginia Woolf's supreme achievement, and my study of it in Chapter Four as the perfect union of her theme and technique does not deviate from this opinion. But the dissatisfaction with the serious elements of the novels that has been evident in all the chapters is perhaps at its strongest in this, her best work. The discussion of Between the Acts as a novel of defeat in Chapter Five thus follows logically. Orlando had shown that in a peculiar way fantasy only frustrates the quest Virginia Woolf had committed herself to in the novels. It is significant, then, that Between the Acts will be found to be related more closely stylistically to Orlando than to any other novel.

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CHAPTER I

MRS. DALLOWAY

At the centre of each of the novels I shall consider in this thesis stands a singular woman, but one who is no more singular than her creator. It will be both Virginia Woolf and her characters who reveal themselves in each chapter, because there existed between them, it will become evident, an unusual sympathy. The writer's own diary proves this fact indisputable; her characters never quite achieved a life of their own. The umbilical cord joining them to the soul of their creator was never severed.

Clarissa Dalloway is the forerunner of this female figure who will dominate the novels. And as forerunner, she possesses qualities which the author envisaged for her descendants. After she had finished Mrs. Dalloway and while embarked on To the Lighthouse, Virginia Woolf wrote:

I am now and then haunted by some semi-mystic very profound life of a woman, which shall all be told on one occasion; and time shall be utterly obliterated; future shall somehow blossom out of the past. One incident - say the fall of a flower - might contain it.¹

Mrs. Dalloway is constructed on a plan very like this; for it is one incident, the party, which contains the view of

Clarissa, and everything in the novel works single-mindedly towards this culmination. The party ultimately contains all the "thought happenings" of the novel. The author has replaced the concern with external events with events of consciousness. Such a technique relies on the enigmatic wanderings of the mind in a domain where present, past, and future time merge, where sudden leaps and gaps adhere to no logical pattern, interrupted by waverings of emotion or flights of fantasy. Virginia Woolf felt her discovery of the technique of incorporating memory into present experience was a significant and a hard-earned one: "It took me a year's groping to discover what I call my tunnelling process, by which I tell the past by instalments, as I have need of it. This is my prime discovery so far...."² The return of Peter Walsh to London after many years, and the presence in London of Septimus Smith, both create the tension in the novel between present and past which exercises this tunnelling process. Because of Peter's return, Clarissa is recreated by him, and recreates herself, as a girl of eighteen, a state which contrasts sharply with the reminder of fears of her own death that Septimus Smith brings.

There is, throughout the novel, a strange congruity between Clarissa's party and death. It is suggested that the party is a celebration of the end of the War, the end of a

kind of death. Yet in the midst of her shopping and buying flowers for the party, Clarissa thinks: "What she loved was this, here, now, in front of her; the fat lady in the cab. Did it matter then, she asked herself, walking towards Bond Street, did it matter that she must inevitably cease completely; all this must go on without her; did she resent it; or did it not become consoling to believe that death ended absolutely?" (Mrs. Dalloway, 16) Both Clarissa's ecstatic enjoyment of life and her frequent thoughts of death are understandable when we learn of her heart ailment. And it is no doubt her personal sympathy with Septimus's plight that results in the strange mixture in her of horror that death should be an intruder at her party, and of admiration for the young man's courage. On the narrative level of the novel Clarissa and Septimus never meet. Yet the party acts like a magnet, drawing all elements of the novel to it, and it is here that the confrontation takes place. But it is Septimus's death that Clarissa confronts, his death in an abstracted form, conceived in imagination after Lady Bradshaw gives a brief account of it. At first Clarissa's reaction is fearful; "Oh! ... in the middle of my party, here's death she thought." (276) What replaces her initial reaction is fascination with the idea that Septimus "had flung it away." (277)

Although Clarissa and Septimus never meet, they identify with one another in a curious way. In an introduction to one edition of the novel the author tells us that "in the first version Septimus, who later is intended to be her double, had no existence; and that Mrs. Dalloway was originally to kill herself, or perhaps merely to die at the end of the party."³ One does not need the author's comment, however, to see what unites them. Septimus has become a prisoner of his past, a prisoner of the organized death that he was forced to witness and to take part in during the war. Clarissa is a prisoner of a heart that she knows is running out of energy.

We are told:

She feared time itself ... how year by year her share was sliced; how little the margin that remained was capable any longer of stretching, of absorbing, as in the youthful years, the colours, salts, tones of existence, so that she filled the room she entered, and felt often, as she stood hesitating one moment on the threshold of her drawing-room, an exquisite suspense, such as might stay a diver before plunging while the sea darkens and brightens beneath him, and the waves which threaten to break, but only gently split their surface, roll and conceal and encrust as they just turn over the weeds with pearl. (47)

It is significant that this is the most time-conscious of the novels; the bells of Big Ben and of other clocks remind us constantly throughout the novel of the ticking away of the hours. At one point, in the mind of Peter Walsh, Clarissa herself becomes identified with time and the chiming of the clocks:

... the sound of St. Margaret's glides into the recesses of the heart and buries itself in ring after ring of sound, like something alive which wants to confide itself, to disperse itself, to be, with a tremor of delight, at rest - like Clarissa herself, he thought, with a deep emotion, and an extraordinarily clear, yet puzzling, recollection of her, as if this bell had come into the room years ago, where they sat at some moment of great intimacy, and had gone from one to the other and had left, like a bee with honey, laden with the moment. But what room? What moment? And why had he been so profoundly happy when the clock was striking? Then, as the sound of St. Margaret's languished, he thought, she has been ill, and the sound expressed languor and suffering. It was her heart, he remembered; and the sudden loudness of the final stroke tolled for death that surprised in the midst of life, Clarissa falling where she stood, in her drawing-room. No! No! he cried, and marched up Whitehall, as if there rolled down to him, vigorous, unending, his future. (76-77)

In another respect Clarissa and Septimus are identical, and that is in their hate for power, for those who would try to control them. It is Miss Kilman who presents this threat in Clarissa's world, Miss Kilman who would convert Clarissa's daughter, Elizabeth, to that religious ecstasy that "only made people callous." (20) Clarissa finds it impossible to keep Joyce Kilman out of her mind:

For it was not her one hated but the idea of her, which undoubtedly had gathered in to itself a great deal that was not Miss Kilman; had become one of those spectres with which one battles in the night; one of those spectres who stand astride us and suck up half our life-blood, dominators and tyrants.... (20)

It is just such a tyrant that Septimus Smith finds himself fighting. Sir William Bradshaw "offers help but desires power." (152) And Septimus understands this instinctively. In the midst of his first visit to Sir William, he says to

himself, "Once you fall ... human nature is on you. Holmes and Bradshaw are on you. They scour the desert. They fly screaming into the wilderness. The rack and the thumbscrew are applied. Human nature is remorseless." (148) Holmes, Bradshaw and Kilman are all of the same breed; all would destroy "the privacy of the soul." (191) It is this knowledge that Rezia reminds him of as she carries a load of his writings upstairs, and it is this knowledge that flings Septimus's body from the window:

Staggering he saw her mount the appalling staircase, laden with Holmes and Bradshaw, men who never weighed less than eleven stone six, who sent their wives to court, men who made ten thousand a year and talked of proportion, who differed in their verdicts (for Holmes said one thing, Bradshaw another), yet judges they were.... (223)

Because of this unknown and unspoken sympathy between them, at her party "she did not pity him ... She felt somehow very like him ... She felt glad that he had done it; thrown it away while they went on living." (280) In a way Septimus's death becomes her death, and even in the midst of her party, the vicarious experience brings her to a level of understanding that she could not otherwise have achieved:

A thing there was that mattered; a thing, wreathed about with chatter, defaced, obscured in her own life, let drop every day in corruption, lies, chatter. This he had preserved. Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate, people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre which, mystically, evaded them; closeness drew apart; rapture faded; one was alone. There was an embrace in death. (277-8)

Septimus Smith is the prototype of two figures who play essential roles in the later novels. He is, first of all, the hero who protests, and in his footsteps follow Mr. Ramsay, Neville and Giles Oliver. He is also the artist. "Here is a young man who carries in him the greatest message in the world," we are told. (127) Yet the price he pays for his knowledge of the truth is his sanity, and the burden of bearing a message that the world will not listen to:

... how the dead sing behind rhododendron bushes; odes to Time; conversations with Shakespeare; Evans, Evans, Evans - his messages from the dead; do not cut down trees; tell the Prime Minister. Universal love: the meaning of the world. Burn them! he cried. (222)

In each of the other novels appears such a figure who must carry the burden of his art.

Mrs. Dalloway sets a precedent as well with the party at its centre. In each of the other novels (with the exception of Orlando) there is a social gathering: the dinners in To the Lighthouse and The Waves; the pageant in Between the Acts; and each gathering, it will be shown, is connected thematically with death. More important, though, is the fact that as a result of each gathering something is found in human experience which compensates in some way for death. Mrs. Dalloway seems to feel responsible for creating a kind of unity by her parties:

Oh, it was very queer. Here was So-and-so in South Kensington; someone up in Bayswater; and somebody else, say, in Mayfair. And she felt quite continuously a sense of their existence; and she felt what a waste; and she felt what a pity; and she felt if only they could be brought together; so she did it. And it was an offering; to combine, to create; but to whom?

An offering for the sake of an offering, perhaps. Anyhow, it was her gift. Nothing else had she of the slightest importance. (184-5)

What is notable about her attitude is the religious terminology which pervades it. On an earlier occasion in the novel this same terminology is used in a slightly different context:

Mrs. Dalloway raised her hand to her eyes, and, as the maid shut the door to, and she heard the swish of Lucy's skirts, she felt like a nun who has left the world and feels fold round her the familiar veils and the response to old devotions. The cook whistled in the kitchen. She heard the click of the typewriter. It was her life, and bending her head over the hall table, she bowed beneath the influence, felt blessed and purified, saying to herself, as she took the pad with the telephone message on it, how moments like this are buds on the tree of life, flowers of darkness they are, she thought ... not for a moment did she believe in God; but all the more, she thought, taking up the pad, must one repay in daily life to servants, yes, to dogs and canaries, above all to Richard her husband, who was the foundation of it - of the gay sounds, of the green lights, of the cook even whistling ... - one must pay back from this secret deposit of exquisite moments. (45-46)

Such moments as these become the sacred ingredients of Clarissa's life. It is her way of coping with the threat of time, for if one becomes immersed in the moment, there is no longer any future; there is only the revelation or the beauty or the peace of here and now:

She was not old yet. She had just broken into her fifty-second year. Months and months of it were still untouched. June, July, August! Each still remained almost whole, and, as if to catch the falling drop, Clarissa (crossing to the dressing-table) plunged into the very heart of the moment, transfixed it there - the moment of this June morning on which was the pressure of all the other mornings, seeing the glass, the dressing-table, and all the bottles afresh, collecting the whole of her at one point (as she looked into the glass), seeing the delicate pink face of the woman who was that very night to give a party; of Clarissa Dalloway; of herself. (57)

Her parties are the attempt to create such moments.

But on another level of human relationship this attempt to plunge into the heart of the moment plays an essential part. Peter Walsh, of any character in the book, is most concerned with trying to compress Clarissa's personality into one understandable moment. He would like to be able to plunge into the heart of her being to know what it is about her that has remained with him all these years, that has kept him, even at a great distance, her lover. Yet when Peter does feel that he knows her, it is by "the power of feeling", (that he and Sally Seton agree upon as the only means of knowing people) not the intellect. In an intuitive response to her he achieves his most complete knowledge of Clarissa. At the end of the novel he waits anxiously for her to return to the room:

What is this terror? what is this ecstasy? he thought to himself. What is it that fills me with extraordinary excitement?

It is Clarissa, he said.
For there she was. (293)

But what characterizes Clarissa's own attitude toward people is her attitude of doubt. Her unwillingness to see anyone in only one light or even to attempt to describe a person in words suggests that she senses that there is something beyond knowledge in the human being. Her approach is an intuitive one:

She would not say of anyone in the world now that they were this or that.... She knew nothing; no language, no history; she scarcely read a book now, except memoirs in bed; and yet to her it was absolutely absorbing; all this; the cabs passing; and she would not say of Peter, she would not say of herself, I am this, I am that.... Her only gift was knowing people almost by instinct, she thought, walking on. If you put her in a room with someone, up went her back like a cat's or she purred. (15)

It is possible that this is Virginia Woolf's own attitude to her creation of character. In the diary she said:

It's a question though of these characters. People, like Arnold Bennett, say I can't create, or didn't in Jacob's Room, characters that survive. My answer is - but I leave that to the Nation: it's only the old argument that character is dissipated into shreds now; the old post-Dostoevsky argument. I daresay it's true, however, that I haven't that 'reality' gift. I insubstantise, wilfully to some extent, distrusting reality - its cheapness.⁴

In "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," Virginia Woolf accuses her predecessors, Wells, Bennett, and Galsworthy of never having looked at human nature. And when she talks of the various ways the posited character of Mrs. Brown could be treated, she says:

The English writer would make the old lady into a 'character'; he would bring out her oddities and mannerisms; her buttons and wrinkles; her ribbons and warts. Her personality would dominate the book. A French writer would rub out all that; he would sacrifice the individual Mrs. Brown to give a more general view of human nature; to make a more abstract, proportioned, and harmonious whole.⁵

What I am suggesting is that Virginia Woolf herself subscribes to the second method. It is exactly this "more general view of human nature", this "abstract, proportioned, and harmonious whole" that she wanted to capture in her characters. In the diary she wrote:

To curtail, I shall really investigate literature with a view to answering certain questions about ourselves. Characters are to be merely views: personality must be avoided at all costs. I'm sure my Conrad adventure taught me this. Directly you specify hair, age etc., something frivolous or irrelevant gets into the book.⁶

If one distrusts reality because it plays tricks on the mind, changing its appearance so quickly that its nature can never be learned, then one must try to see it from as many angles as possible. A multiplicity of viewpoints at least prevents narrow-minded judgments. But there is a disadvantage when such a theory is applied to personal relationships and to their representation in a work of fiction. Even though Peter Walsh and Virginia Woolf would hesitate to condense Clarissa into words, they still seem to be looking for a pattern, not content with merely a conglomeration of impressions. The most significant impressions of her character

thus become those moments when a mysterious summing up process occurs, as in Peter's experience of her. But in this process, Clarissa, as an individual, seems somehow to be obliterated. Peter's pronouncement of "There she was" is rather feeble. Personality, Virginia Woolf had said, had to be eliminated. But then what have we left - "the abstract, proportioned and harmonious whole?" If this whole is what Virginia Woolf is trying to express, she could only do so by seeking to unify the many distinctly separate impressions. The paradox of this outlook, which pervades all of Virginia Woolf's work, is thus evident in *Clarissa Dalloway*. "The result," says J.K. Johnstone, "is a character whom we can sum up no more than Virginia Woolf can, but who is completely convincing, because she has about her the reality, the infinite diversity, and beneath diversity, the essential unity, of life."⁷

Thus we have a contradictory pattern set up of doubt in the possibility of knowledge existing simultaneously with the desire for complete knowledge, for the moment when "things came together." (229) This dialectical pattern, it will be shown, exists in all of the novels under discussion, not only on a social level, nor just in relationships between individuals. T.S. Eliot once wrote "that at the present time the problem of the unification of the world and the problem of

the unification of the individual are in the end one and the same problem; and that the solution of one is the solution of the other."⁸ It is perhaps this kind of unity that is the ultimate experience Virginia Woolf's characters seek. Both Peter and Clarissa have this kind of experience, for which they both are indebted to Septimus Smith. Peter is standing outside the British Museum when the ambulance carrying Septimus's body races by, and for him, it is "a moment in which things came together; this ambulance; and life and death. It was as if he were sucked up to some very high roof by that rush of emotion, and the rest of him, like a white shell-sprinkled beach, left bare." (229)

Clarissa had come to understand through Septimus, that death was an embrace. What it was an embrace of remains ambiguous. But an early episode in the book can perhaps be interpreted as central to its meaning. When Peter Walsh goes to the park after first seeing Clarissa, he falls asleep on a bench. A section follows in which he is in the twilight state between sleeping and waking during which his imagination creates the rhapsody of the solitary traveller. On one of his endless wanderings, the traveller looks up to see what he thinks is a giant figure at the end of his ride: By conviction an atheist perhaps, he is taken by surprise with moments of extraordinary exaltation. Nothing exists

outside us except a state of mind, he thinks; a desire for solace, for relief, for something outside these miserable pigmies, these feeble, these ugly, these craven men and women. But if he can conceive of her, then in some sort she exists, he thinks, and advancing down the path with his eyes upon sky and branches he rapidly endows them with womanhood; sees with amazement how grave they become; how majestically, as the breeze stirs them, they dispense with a dark flutter of the leaves, charity, comprehension, absolution, and then, flinging themselves suddenly aloft, confound the piety of their aspect with a wild carouse. (87)

Such a vision, it goes on to say, makes it seem as if "all this fever of living were simplicity itself; and myriads of things merged in one thing." (88) At first reading this fantastic excursion might seem irrelevant to the novel, but on closer examination many interesting factors emerge. The religious terminology, for example, recalls Clarissa's attitude to her life. Although possibly an atheist, the solitary traveller hopes to find "charity, comprehension, absolution;" and the figure itself seems to be a kind of earth-mother (the grey nurse knitting beside him on the bench has obviously been incorporated into the dream). This digression seems to be a fantastic, almost mythical, representation of the spiritual pilgrimage of all the novels of Virginia Woolf. The traveller seems to fear that "nothing exists outside us except a state of mind", but if he can conceive of the gigantic figure he imagines he sees, then somehow she exists. He proceeds, then, to endow natural objects with the qualities

of womanhood that will offer the solace and relief he desires; even the necessity of having to attribute these qualities to non-human objects shows the weakness of his vision. And consequently, the branches merely toss themselves "with a wild carouse", not offering any of the things he had hoped.

The traveller is imprisoned by his own mind, yet he has the need to feel that there is something real outside him, something that frees him from his claustrophobia. And with his vision of the earth-mother figure he tries to make contact with this objective reality that is "myriads of things merged in one thing". Now this seems to be ~~exa~~actly what Virginia Woolf herself is doing in Mrs. Dalloway and in the other novels. And all the moments of insight when things come together are just such attempts to experience an objective reality that the individual feels must exist if he can conceive of it. When Clarissa thinks of Septimus's death, she understands that it has been a protest against "the impossibility of reaching the centre which, mystically, evaded them." (278) Like the solitary traveller, the individual finds that the giant figure dissolves as he approaches it. If nothing exists outside of us except a state of mind, then the attempt to create something may simply be a recognition of the gap. Perhaps this is all that Septimus's embrace is.

The solitary traveller myth, if it can be called such, gives us insight into the nature of this unity, or reality, or absolute that Virginia Woolf sought. And the mode in which it is expressed, that of fantasy, will be found to increase in significance with each novel. Most often in the novels what she seeks is connected with images of the sea. Clarissa Dallo-way has a "perpetual sense, as she watched the taxicabs, of being out, out, far out to sea and alone." (15) And later she describes her awareness of the flow of time as living in "an exquisite suspense, such as might stay a diver before plunging while the sea darkens and brightens beneath him." (47) And the constant reiteration of the phrase "Fear no more" suggests this same quest for a pattern to which all things could be subjected. "So on a summer's day," Clarissa says, "waves collect, overbalance, and fall; collect and fall; and the whole world seems to be saying 'that is all' more and more ponderously, until even the heart in the body which lies in the sun on the beach says too, That is all. Fear no more, says the heart, committing its burden to some sea, which sighs collectively for all sorrows, and renews, begins, collects, lets fall." (61) The driving force that keeps one going is also associated with the sea: "the indomitable egotism which for ever rides down the hosts opposed to it, the river which says on, on, on; even though, it admits, there may be no goal for

us whatsoever, still on, on...." (69) At her party, when Clarissa walks with the Prime Minister, she is described as a mermaid "lolloping on the waves." (261-2)

Septimus, too, is associated with imagery of the sea, but there is a significant difference; for him, the quest has been too much. Hence, he is "this last relic straying on the edge of the world, this outcast, who gazed back at the inhabited regions, who lay, like a drowned sailor, on the shore of the world." (141) The sea is great enough, and mysterious and incomprehensible enough to stand for this central unity. In this context one passage from the diary is particularly significant:

Often down here I have entered into a sanctuary; a nunnery; had a religious retreat; of great agony once; and always some terror; so afraid one is of loneliness; of seeing to the bottom of the vessel. That is one of the experiences I have had here in some Augusts; and got then to a consciousness of what I call 'reality': a thing I see before me: something abstract; but residing in the downs or sky; beside which nothing matters; in which I shall rest and continue to exist. Reality I call it. And I fancy sometimes this is the most necessary thing to me: that which I seek. But who knows - once one takes a pen and writes? How difficult not to go making 'reality' this and that, whereas it is one thing. Now perhaps this is my gift: this perhaps is what distinguishes me from other people: I think it may be rare to have so acute a sense of something like that - but again, who knows? I would like to express it too.⁹

If there is no such reality to be found, then each is consigned to his own separate world, and the code must be simply to respect the separate worlds of other people. It is

this which Clarissa finds so admirable in the old lady whom she often sees from her window, and it is this right to separateness that the Holmes's, Bradshaws, and Kilmans of this world would wrest away. Clarissa sees the old lady move from the window, as she has seen her do many times before:

... as if she were attached to that sound, that string. Gigantic as it was, it had something to do with her. Down, down, into the midst of ordinary things the finger fell, making the moment solemn. She was forced, so Clarissa imagined, by that sound, to move, to go - but where? Clarissa tried to follow her as she turned and disappeared, and could still just see her white cap moving at the back of the bedroom. She was still there, moving about at the other end of the room. Why creeds and prayers and mackintoshes? when, thought Clarissa, that's the miracle, that's the mystery; that old lady, she meant, whom she could see going from a chest of drawers to dressing-table. She could still see her. And the supreme mystery which Kilman might say she had solved, or Peter might say he had solved, but Clarissa didn't believe either of them had the ghost of an idea of solving, was simply this: here was one room; there another. Did religion solve that, or love? (192-3)

CHAPTER II

TO THE LIGHTHOUSE

When James finally does take that promised trip to the lighthouse, years after his mother's death, the experience convinces him that "Nothing was simply one thing." (To the Lighthouse, 286). Indeed, it is impossible to discuss the lighthouse as "simply one thing". Throughout the novel the lighthouse accumulates its meaning; its beam radiates in many directions. Yet it remains the central symbol of unity, the point at which the aesthetic form intersects with the revelations of character and the metaphysical implications. As a structural principle, the beam of the lighthouse suggests the shape of the book. The "symbolic design" that results is the means of imposing order on the disordered ideas and emotions that shape the content of the novel.¹ The getting to the lighthouse is the plot, a frame into which we can set all the digressions of thought throughout the novel. And the long-short-long rhythm of the light is echoed by the long first section at the window, the short central section which conveys the passage of time, and the long final section of the actual trip that the family makes.

In the first part of the book, we reach the lighthouse only by way of Mrs. Ramsay, and she becomes identified with it in a peculiar sort of way. In the last part, she and the lighthouse are separated. Lily Briscoe finds what it is in Mrs. Ramsay that triumphs over time; Mr. Ramsay at last makes the trip to the lighthouse. At the exact moment when Lily has her vision, Mr. Ramsay reaches the lighthouse, so that at the end Mrs. Ramsay and the lighthouse are reunited. In this way, Virginia Woolf sustains the plot after the death of her heroine. As we shall see, Lily solves in art what Mr. Ramsay solves physically and what Mrs. Ramsay solved in her vision.

In Mrs. Dalloway, Virginia Woolf effects the psychological unification between Septimus and Clarissa. And in To the Lighthouse Mrs. Ramsay also breaks the confines of personality, by identifying not with another person, but with a thing, the lighthouse. It is during this experience that Mrs. Ramsay has the most intense awareness of her own self, as something quite different from the "surface self" that everyone else knows. The surface self, the Mrs. Ramsay who knits stockings for the lighthouse-keeper's boy, who gives dinner parties, who delights in match-making is Mrs. Ramsay's personality. But she is quite aware that she has a further identity, one that is known only to her. Hence:

She could be herself, by herself. And that was what now she often felt the need of - to think; well not even to think. To be silent; to be alone. All the being and the doing, expansive, glittering, vocal, evaporated; and one shrunk, with a sense of solemnity, to being oneself, a wedge-shaped core of darkness, something invisible to others. (99)

It is this core of darkness that meets the beam from the lighthouse:

Often she found herself sitting and looking, sitting and looking, with her work in her hands until she became the thing she looked at - that light for example. (100-01)

...she looked at the steady light, the pitiless, the remorseless, which was so much her, yet so little her, which had her at its beck and call (she woke in the night and saw it bent across their bed, stroking the floor), but for all that she thought, watching it with fascination, hypnotized, as if it were stroking with its silver fingers some sealed vessel in her brain whose bursting would flood her with delight, she had known happiness, exquisite happiness, intense happiness, and it silvered the rough waves a little more brightly, as daylight faded, and the blue went out of the sea and it rolled in waves of pure lemon which curved and swelled and broke upon the beach and the ecstasy burst in her eyes and waves of pure delight raced over the floor of her mind and she felt, It is enough! It is enough! (103-04)

She has made the trip in her own way, and by it she arrives at some plateau of understanding, or at least of peace and satisfaction, that the lighthouse has made possible. In order to reach the lighthouse, we have to go through Mrs. Ramsay. The two are inseparable. They are metaphorically identical in the way that Northrop Frye tells us one thing can become another and still maintain its individuality.²

Because of this identity, in learning about Mrs.

Ramsay we are indirectly learning about the lighthouse. Just as we feel that there are innumerable things we shall never know about Mrs. Ramsay, so also the lighthouse remains an enigma only partially revealed. But with Virginia Woolf, meaning is mystery. What, for example, do we learn from this moment of vision that Mrs. Ramsay experiences? That the light is "pitiless" (and why, of all things, should it be this?); that it is her, and not her; that it has a fascination and a strange power over her; that either in spite of it, or because of it, she can feel an ecstatic joy that is "enough". Enough for what? Virginia Woolf is not trying to be explicit. We have the illusion of reaching some level of meaning with Mrs. Ramsay, but actually, what we have had is not an intellectual experience, but an emotional one. For who could read that one long sentence without being caught up in its rhythmic intensity, and without feeling the release of the final exclamations?

In Chapter I, I said that the most significant moment of character revelation occurs with Clarissa Dalloway when a mysterious summing up process takes place. Similarly, when Mrs. Ramsay becomes aware of herself as a wedge-shaped core of darkness, and aware of her feelings about the lighthouse beam, the same unifying process seems to be at work. She says:

There was freedom, there was peace, there was, most welcome of all, a summoning together, a resting on a platform of stability. Not as oneself did one find rest ever, in her experience (she accomplished here something dexterous with her needles), but as a wedge of darkness. Losing personality, one lost the fret, the hurry, the stir; and there rose to her lips always some exclamation of triumph over life when things came together in this peace, this rest, this eternity; and pausing there she looked out to meet that stroke of the Lighthouse.... (100)

What is interesting is that she feels it is necessary to lose personality to be able to experience this rest and this eternity. She has to exchange the trappings of her everyday self for an aspect of herself that no one else can ever know. When Virginia Woolf said (p. 11) that personality was to be avoided at all costs in character creation she was stating her preference for an interest in the identities of her characters which could only be found when the social identity had been rejected. As I suggested earlier, perhaps Virginia Woolf is primarily interested in the pursuit of "the abstract, proportioned and harmonious whole" that seems to be at least a possibility of human nature. Thus, in To the Lighthouse we are faced with a description of the essential nature of Mrs. Ramsay as "a wedge-shaped core of darkness". What Mrs. Woolf seeks to express in her characters must itself become abstract and nebulous.

But there is another possibility that should be investigated, and that is whether the peculiar quality that is

evident in all her characters is the result of their subordination "to the author's will and temperament", and the consequent "decline of the individual character to a shadowy and subordinate status."³ In his book Characters of Love John Bayley claims that the great conventional character can only be created by love or, in other words, by the author's delight in the existence of another person. Modern authors tend to create characters as projections of their own visions. Consequently, the characters lose their independence, and "the older idea of personalities inside a novel has been replaced by that of the personality of the novel itself."⁴ This explanation may very well account for why so many critics claim that they never really know Clarissa Dalloway; she tends to be absorbed into the general atmosphere of the novel itself.

According to Bayley, then, the personality of the author often takes over at the expense of the characters he is creating. But there is some evidence to show that Virginia Woolf thought such a condition might be beneficial to the novel. In an essay entitled "Phases of Fiction" she made the following comment on Sterne's Tristram Shandy:

...in no other book are the characters so closely dependent on the author. In no other book are the writer and reader so involved together. So, finally, we get a book in which all the usual conventions are consumed and yet no ruin or catastrophe comes to pass; the whole subsists complete by itself, like a house which is miraculously habitable without the help of walls,

staircases, or partitions. We live in the humours, contortions, and oddities of the spirit, not in the slow unrolling of the long length of life. And the reflection comes, as we sun ourselves on one of these high pinnacles, can we not escape even further, so that we are not conscious of any author at all? Can we not find poetry in some novel or other? For Sterne by the beauty of his style has let us pass beyond the range of personality into a world which is not altogether the world of fiction. It is above.⁵

Like Sterne, Virginia Woolf was concerned with a novel in which many of the usual conventions were consumed. She seems to regard the stage which Sterne had reached, in which the characters were so closely dependent on the author, as intermediate to one in which the reader was not conscious of the author at all. But most significant of all, the entry into this realm of poetry "above" the world of fiction (the directions are somewhat confusing) enables us to "pass beyond the range of personality". Since Virginia Woolf herself became more and more absorbed in a novelistic style that approached closer to poetry than to fiction, she seems to have felt the necessity of passing beyond the range of personality. And, as we have seen with Mrs. Ramsay, often when we have escaped from the range of personality, we are merely into that of darkness.

The author does not disappear, it is important to notice; he is just skilfully concealed so that the reader is not conscious of him. As Bayley has suggested, the author's

personality may simply dominate the novel until it is impossible to distinguish one from the other, and with Virginia Woolf this would seem to be the case. In one of her essays she had said, "To believe that your impressions hold good for others is to be released from the cramp and confinement of personality."⁶ David Daiches, commenting on this remark, has said that "The moderns, as Virginia Woolf saw them, lived in an age without common belief and therefore could not be free from the cramp and confinement of personality. ...Yet there was a way out of the difficulty, it might be possible to make a virtue of necessity, to find a way of writing out of a personal sense of truth so as to convey that sense to the reader as he reads. That is the course that Virginia Woolf took."⁷ Part of the personal sense of truth that Virginia Woolf conveys deals with the necessity of breaking through the barrier of the individual personality. Mrs. Ramsay breaks down this barrier by surrendering the uniqueness of her ego to an impersonal reality.⁸

As we have found in Mrs. Dalloway, this impersonal reality communicates itself as a sense of unity; other than that, it remains vague and undefined. But in Mrs. Dalloway this sense of unity is experienced by a coming together of various things within the individual. Peter Walsh feels the

richness, the infinite variety of life, its miraculous quality, at the same time as he has a vivid realization of the finality of death. In To the Lighthouse, however, the impersonal reality is objectified in the lighthouse itself, and the feelings of unification that the various characters have are always connected with the lighthouse. As we said earlier in learning about Mrs. Ramsay we are indirectly learning about the lighthouse, and vice-versa. One critic has said that "by the time she dies, the lighthouse has become the meaning of Mrs. Ramsay."⁹ In a sense, it becomes the repository for her most profound apprehension of the mystery of life.

As a symbolic structure, the lighthouse definitely implies the supernatural, yet in doing so it retains an indefinite number of possibilities. Whatever the supernatural implied by the lighthouse, it is certainly not religious in any orthodox sense. While Mrs. Ramsay sits and knits, and before the moment of truth, she involuntarily finds herself saying, "We are in the hands of the Lord." Whatever possessed her to say such a thing she cannot imagine; "The insincerity slipping in among the truths roused her, annoyed her. She returned to her knitting again. How could any Lord have made this world? she asked. With her mind she had always seized the fact that there is no reason, order, justice: but suffering, death, the poor. There was no treachery too

base for the world to commit; she knew that. No happiness lasted...." (102)

Whatever the vision is that the light leads her to, it is an intensely personal one. Perhaps Mrs. Ramsay understands as little of it as we do; and therefore any attempt to translate the symbol of the lighthouse, to say that it is "this" or "that" is simple-minded. The problem is that it invites this kind of interpretation, because we never feel that the lighthouse is an end in itself. It stands as a midway point, led up to by Mrs. Ramsay; but what lies on the other side remains conjecture. Northrop Frye suggests that we call the lighthouse a heraldic symbol, a central emblematic image. As such, it is "closely related to if not identical with the objective correlative",... [it] "is in a paradoxical and ironic relation to both narrative and meaning. As a unit of meaning it arrests the narrative; as a unit of narrative, it perplexes the meaning. It combines the qualities of Carlyle's intrinsic symbol with significance in itself, and the extrinsic symbol which points quizzically to something else."¹⁰

Regarding the lighthouse in this way is most satisfactory for two reasons: first, as an objective correlative the lighthouse is the equivalent of an emotion which would otherwise be inexpressible. The emotional experience is the

important thing, as we said earlier in the discussion of Mrs. Ramsay's vision of the lighthouse. Second, this interpretation is open-ended; it allows for the indefinite number of possibilities that such a symbol suggests. In pointing "quizzically to something else," it leaves room for what is on the other side of the lighthouse.

What this something else is will depend very much on who is looking at it. Mrs. Ramsay's vision, we have said, is intensely personal; so is Lily Briscoe's, which is set in counterpoint to the main one.¹¹ Mrs. Ramsay, we are told, "thought life ... She took a look at life, for she had a clear sense of it there, something real, something private, which she shared neither with her children nor with her husband." (95) Even at the dinner, therefore, this process of "thinking" life continues. Even as she serves the "Boeuf en Daube" she continues to bring things together, and the vision of the lighthouse she had in the afternoon is adumbrated in a new and wider context:

Nothing need be said; nothing could be said. There it was, all round them. It partook, she felt, carefully helping Mr. Bankes to a specially tender piece, of eternity; as she had already felt about something different once before that afternoon; there is a coherence in things, a stability; something, she meant, is immune from change, and shines out (she glanced at the window with its ripples of reflected lights) in the face of the flowing, the fleeting, the spectral, like a ruby; so that again tonight she had the feeling she had had once today already, of peace, of rest. Of such moments, she

thought, the thing is made that remains for ever after. This would remain.

'Yes,' she assured William Bankes, 'there is plenty for everybody.' (163)

Leaving the dinner, exhilarated by the emotional experience she has had, Mrs. Ramsay stops to isolate the exact thing that had made the experience:

They would, she thought, going on again, however long they lived, come back to this night; this moon; this wind; this house; and to her too. It flattered her, where she was most susceptible of flattery, to think how, wound about in their hearts, however long they lived she would be woven;... All that would be revived again in the lives of Paul and Minta. ...and she felt, with her hand on the nursery door, that community of feeling with other people which emotion gives as if the walls of partition had become so thin that practically (the feeling was one of relief and happiness) it was all one stream, and chairs, tables, maps, were hers, were theirs, it did not matter whose, and Paul and Minta would carry it on when she was dead. (175-6)

Thus the thing that matters again derives from the sense of unity, this time not with an external object, but with other people. "It was all one stream," she says. Is this experience, though, identical with that in the previous quotation in which she realized something was immune from change? For if it is, Mrs. Ramsay conceives only of a conditioned sort of eternity, and therefore, not an eternity at all. The sense of unity that she feels with the other people will be lost with them; as long as they live, Mrs. Ramsay thinks, this moment will be immortalized in their memory. Even as she leaves the dining room Mrs. Ramsay realizes that the

experience she had is disintegrating. "With her foot on the threshold," we are told, "she waited a moment longer in a scene which was vanishing even as she looked, and then, as she moved and took Minta's arm and left the room, it changed, it shaped itself differently; it had become, she knew, giving one last look at it over her shoulder, already the past." (172-3) It seems likely that Mrs. Ramsay is thinking about two different things. The eternity that is immune from change, that triumphs over the flux, that gives her the sense of peace and security like the lighthouse is not the same as the thing that will survive in the memories of those people she loves. Her private vision, recounted at the dinner, is of an absolute that underlies all things, and that makes the communion with others possible.

Belief in an impersonal reality entails the anxiety that comes from never being able to approach this reality, never knowing its true shape. Mrs. Ramsay must turn from her intuitive apprehension of this nebulous reality to something tangible - her relationship with the people around her - and this relationship must eventually dissolve.

In many passages in the Diary Virginia Woolf hints at a similar quest in her own life. While working on To the Lighthouse she wrote, "I wished to add some remarks to this, on the mystical side of this solicitude; how it is not oneself but

something in the universe that one's left with."¹² But, like Mrs. Ramsay, she finds this "something in the universe" so remote that it often simply evaporated. "For after all," she says, "that is my temperament, I think, to be very little persuaded of the truth of anything - what I say, what people say...."¹³ In a sense, her nature drove her, like the solitary traveller in Mrs. Dalloway, on this quest for some sympathetic reality beyond herself in the universe, but her nature also frustrated this quest, because her scepticism prevented her from ever really finding what she sought. "But by writing," she said once, "I don't reach anything. All I mean to make is a note of a curious state of mind."¹⁴ Most often, then, in the novels, particularly in the accounts of the visionary unifying experiences that the characters have, the impersonal reality that they seem to be apprehending is no nearer. As with Mrs. Ramsay's vision of the lighthouse, the result is not knowledge or understanding, but emotion. And what we are given is the account of an emotional apprehension of the reality she is seeking.

One cannot emphasize too strongly the important role that the analysis of emotions played in the future of the novel as Virginia Woolf saw it. As in the comment on Laurence Sterne, she sees the novel as moving towards poetry and away

from personality. The characteristics of the novel of the future are that:

...it will stand further back from life. It will give, as poetry does, the outline rather than the detail. It will make little use of the marvellous fact-recording power, which is one of the attributes of fiction. ...With these limitations it will express the feeling and ideas of the characters closely and vividly, but from a different angle. It will resemble poetry in this that it will give not only or mainly people's relations to each other and their activities together as the novel has hitherto done, but it will give the relation of the mind to general ideas and its soliloquy in solitude. For under the dominion of the novel we have scrutinized one part of the mind closely and left another unexplored. We have come to forget that a large and important part of life consists in our emotions toward such things as roses and nightingales, the dawn, the sunset, life, death, and fate; we forget that we spend much time sleeping, dreaming, thinking, reading, alone; we are not entirely occupied in personal relations; all our energies are not absorbed in making our livings. ...We long for some more impersonal relationship. We long for ideas, for dreams, for imaginations, for poetry.¹⁵

The scrutinizing of emotions in this way takes on profound significance when we set it in a wider context. In his book Time in Literature Hans Meyerhoff advances the theory that most of modern literature is concerned with a quest for the self. This quest is carried out, in writers such as Proust, by a reconstruction of the self through memory. If it can be ascertained that a certain number of actions have been performed by one particular being, then the sum of these actions becomes the identity of the person. Meyerhoff says:

It is the 'stream of consciousness' which serves to clarify or render intelligible both the element of duration in time and the aspect of an enduring self. The technique is

designed to give some kind of visible, sensible impression of how it is meaningful and intelligible to think of the self as a continuing unit despite the most perplexing and chaotic manifold of immediate experience. ...For what binds the chaotic pieces floating through the daydreams and fantasies of an individual into some kind of unity is that they make 'sense' - sense defined in terms of significant associative images - only if they are referred to or seen within the perspective of the same self.¹⁶

The perception of the self, therefore, is analogous to that of the perception of time as duration; for both depend upon the mind to unite a series of separate events, to construct the unity within multiplicity which is the only way of finding order or pattern in experience.

What Virginia Woolf is doing, it is possible to claim, is an emotional reconstruction of the self. "Any turn in the wheel of sensation," she says on the first page of To the Lighthouse, "has the power to crystallize and transfix the moment upon which its gloom or radiance rests." (11) It is these moments that have been transfixed that are stored in a person's memory. Once dislodged, they can initiate an avalanche of related sensations that recalls entire experiences. One of the best examples of this process in To the Lighthouse is connected with James. Much of the first section of the book takes place against the background of Mrs. Ramsay reading to James in the window of their home. This is the day before the proposed trip to the lighthouse and James dwells in the precarious world between gratitude and love for his

mother, who has promised him the trip, and hate for his father and Charles Tansley, who stalk up and down declaring that the weather will not be fine. The men, it turns out, have more meteorological knowledge, and the trip is not made. Mrs. Ramsay dies shortly after, and ten years pass during which the family never returns to the summer home. When they do, and Mr. Ramsay proposes a trip to the lighthouse, James, now grown, re-lives the emotional turmoil of the day spent with his mother over ten years before. But the memory returns only gradually and slowly, as the transmixed moments come to the surface and bring with them the emotions of his childhood. In the boat, "He began to search among the infinite series of impressions which time had laid down, leaf upon leaf, fold upon fold softly, incessantly upon his brain; among scents, sounds; voices, harsh, hollow, sweet; and lights passing, and brooms tapping; and the wash and hush of the sea, how a man had marched up and down and stopped dead, upright, over them." (195) He has the same instinctive reaction to his father's attempt to dominate: "...I shall take a knife and strike him to the heart. He had always kept this old symbol of taking a knife and striking his father to the heart." (282) When he examines his feelings about his father, that whole day in his childhood returns in a flood of memories of his mother and the lighthouse, and his disappointed hopes. With this sort

of emotional reconstruction through memory Virginia Woolf unifies the diverse actions of her characters.

It is significant that the artist-figure in To the Lighthouse does exactly the same thing. For it is only when Lily recreates the emotional experience of losing Mrs. Ramsay that she is able to complete the painting of her that has been neglected for ten years. At first she feels "Nothing, nothing - nothing that she could express at all." (225) Only as she forces herself to recall her love for Mrs. Ramsay and the excruciating physical sense of loss at her death, does the painting acquire shape and form. The effect of the memory on her is to resolve all the contradictions, all the wayward, uncontrollable elements of the painting into a unity:

That woman sitting there, writing under the rock resolved everything into simplicity; made these angers, irritations fall off like old rags; she brought together this and that and then this, and so made out of that miserable silliness and spite (she and Charles squabbling, sparring, had been silly and spiteful) something - this scene on the beach for example, this moment of friendship and liking - which survived, after all these years, complete, so that she dipped into it to re-fashion her memory of him, and it stayed in the mind almost like a work of art. (248-9)

As the memory of this day returns, the unreality that Lily felt disappears, and now, "the whole world seemed to have dissolved in this early morning hour in a pool of thought, a deep basin of reality." (207)

The mysterious quality that Mrs. Ramsay possesses

that gives her this power over life and over other people is somehow connected with love. Lily finds inexplicable her impulse to throw herself at Mrs. Ramsay's feet exclaiming, absurdly, that she was in love with her, in love "with this all". And William Bankes realizes that it is this kind of love, given freely and without demands to all the world, that is the essential thing about Mrs. Ramsay; this is what enables her to make life almost like a work of art. He says, "The world by all means should have shared it, [love] could Mr. Bankes have said why that woman pleased him so; why the sight of her reading a fairy tale to her boy had upon him precisely the same effect as the solution of a scientific problem, so that he rested in contemplation of it, and felt, as he felt when he had proved something absolute about the digestive system of plants, that barbarity was tamed, the reign of chaos subdued." (77) Love, then, has the potentiality of bringing order to experience, and Lily sees such love as the means of fulfilling her greatest desire:

What device for becoming, like waters poured into one jar, inextricably the same, one with the object one adored? Could the body achieve it, or the mind, subtly mingling in the intricate passages of the brain? or the heart? Could loving, as people called it, make her and Mrs. Ramsay one? for it was not knowledge but unity that she desired, not inscriptions on tablets, nothing that could be written in any language known to men, but intimacy itself, which is knowledge, she had thought, leaning her head on Mrs. Ramsay's knee. (82-3)

It is only when Lily re-lives her emotional ties with Mrs. Ramsay that she overcomes the extraordinary unreality that had possessed her since her return to the Ramsay's summer home.

The belief in love as the channel to the centre of reality had much support from the Bloomsbury group. Roger Fry, who influenced Virginia Woolf greatly, wrote, in 1924: "Par l'amour et seulement par l'amour, nous touchons ou croyons toucher à une réalité solide, à un monde peuplé de vraies substances, des âmes, des substances indestructibles, éternelles, définitives. Dans tout le reste de notre vie règne une relativité complète."¹⁷

There is, however, in To the Lighthouse never a wholehearted embrace of love as the answer to life. Whatever the virtues that accompany the sort of love Mrs. Ramsay may offer, we are also reminded that love easily turns into domination. (Mrs. Doyle accuses Mrs. Ramsay, we are told, of robbing her of her daughter's affections.) In Mrs. Dalloway love and religion emerge as potentially two of the most insidious culprits in human society. An ominous ambiguity surrounds Mrs. Ramsay's matchmaking efforts. As she serves the "Boeuf en Daube," congratulating herself on the engagement of Paul and Minta, there is "a curious sense rising in her, at once freakish and tender, of celebrating a festival, as if two

emotions were called up in her, one profound - for what could be more serious than the love of man for woman, what more commanding, more impressive, bearing in its bosom the seeds of death; at the same time these lovers, these people entering into illusion glittering eyed, must be danced around with mockery, decorated with garlands." (157) And elsewhere, Mrs. Ramsay's matchmaking is spoken of "almost as if it were an escape for her too, to say that people must marry; people must have children." (96) And although Lily pays homage to the sort of love she sees the Ramsays have, at the same time she sknows it is the most beautiful and the most barbaric of human passions; "Such was the complexity of things. For what happened to her, especially staying with the Ramsays, was to be made to feel violently two opposite things at the same time...." (159)

It is the necessity to probe into the mystery of this contradiction that makes Lily an artist. In her own way, Mrs. Ramsay is an artist as well. She creates the circle of life for her husband when he turns to her to supply his need for warmth and sympathy. She fascinates Lily and William Bankes with her ability to make life itself the material for a work of art. And at the dinner, Mrs. Ramsay feels the burden of her art: "Nothing seemed to have merged. They all sat separate. And the whole of the effort of merging and flowing

and creating rested on her. Again she felt, as a fact without hostility, the sterility of men, for if she did not do it nobody would do it...." (130-31) But the unity that Mrs. Ramsay creates does not last, and perhaps this is why the undeniable sense of scepticism surrounds the efforts of love, and why the people enter "into illusion glittering eyed". Mrs. Ramsay herself recognizes the disintegration of her effort at the dinner as she leaves, knowing that it becomes "already the past." Her creative efforts are totally ineffectual against death: she herself dies; Prue dies, in spite of the fact that Mrs. Ramsay promised her a long life and happy marriage; Andrew, too, dies at a young age. And even in life, her attempts to merge separate human beings are at best precarious: the marriage of Paul and Minta is a failure; and even the trip to the lighthouse fails because of the weather. Perhaps it is because she knows that the unity she creates will not last that she carries on her matchmaking with such desperate necessity.

It seems that the ability to love takes a certain kind of faith, or a certain kind of audacity, that not everyone is prepared to risk. The artist is a lover and both functions meet in Mrs. Ramsay. It is the peculiar combination of the two that keeps the unfinished painting festering in Lily's mind over the years. She says that:

It was some such feeling of completeness perhaps which, ten years ago, standing almost where she stood now, had made her say that she must be in love with the place. Love had a thousand shapes. There might be lovers whose gift it was to choose out the elements of things and place them together and so, giving them a wholeness not theirs in life, make of some scene, or meeting of people (all now gone and separate), one of those globed compacted things over which thought lingers, and love plays. (295-6)

This feeling of completeness is the closest to knowledge that we get, for it seems that love can grant only unity, not knowledge. Thus Lily comes "to rest in the extreme obscurity of human relationships. Who knows what we are, what we feel? Who knows even at the moment of intimacy. This is knowledge?" (265) Lily, then, finally relinquishes the pursuit of knowledge for the simulation of unity in the work of art. Was there, she asks, "No guide, no shelter, but all was miracle, and leaping from the pinnacle of a tower into the air?" (277) And this seems to be the conclusion that James and Mr. Ramsay reach, for the last action Ramsay performs in the book: "He rose and stood in the bow of the boat, very straight and tall, for all the world, James thought, as if he were saying, 'There is no God,' and Cam thought, as if he were leaping into space.... (318)

It may be that the realization that what she was creating was only the illusion of unity, however intense her desire to apprehend that reality in life, produces the

peculiar quality of her work. The feature which eludes definition, E.M. Forster suggests, is fantasy. Deprive her of this element, he says, and nothing is left at all.¹⁸ We have found this element present in Mrs. Dalloway, and what it demands of the reader, wherever it is found, is an extra stretch of the imagination. A novelist who indulges in fantastic excursions denies the common sense outlook on life. Such an approach suggests that life is not orderly and causally determined, as we like to think, but something much more erratic and undependable.

The technique of fantasy is, in a sense, a natural one for Virginia Woolf to employ. She rejects an external reality, we have seen, in favour of one apprehended by psychic processes. But portrayal of the human mind necessarily involves the fantastic; the mind refuses to restrict itself to the boundaries of conventional reality. The fantasy tends to be playful only on the surface. In Mrs. Dalloway, as we have seen, the solitary traveller episode can be seen as a sort of mythical representation of the whole book, perhaps of Virginia Woolf's whole artistic career. If, as E.M. Forster says, "fantasy implies the supernatural but need not express it," then the lighthouse may be seen as the most complex expression of fantasy in the book.¹⁹

It is possible to see the dinner episode in this same

framework. Everything works toward the creation of a fantastic, other-worldly atmosphere. The lighting of the candles takes us to the periphery of the possible. Our hold on reality becomes tenuous, slackens, till reality seems so dull compared to what is over the brink. Anything could happen, we feel:

Now all the candles were lit, and the faces on both sides of the table were brought nearer by the candle light, and composed, as they had not been in the twilight, into a party round a table, for the night was now shut off by panes of glass, which, far from giving any accurate view of the outside world, rippled it so strangely that here, inside the room seemed to be order and dry land; there, outside, a reflection in which things wavered and vanished, waterily. (151)

Now, if the portrayal of characters, the attempts to confront a metaphysical reality, the ambitions of the artist-figure, the aim of the love which plays such an important role in To the Lighthouse, if what all these elements have in common is their function of establishing a unity, a kind of absolute, however illusory, and this unity, as we have seen, is doomed to disintegrate, then the all-pervasive tone of fantasy in the novel can be seen in a profound light. For, as John Graham says, in an illuminating article on Virginia Woolf, "the satisfaction of fantasy may be comic, or it may take a more serious form of wish-fulfillment."²⁰ The fantasy, therefore, may be seen as an attempt to create in imagination, what she fears does not exist in reality. And beyond this,

even the necessity for Virginia Woolf to create at all fits into this pattern. As one critic has said, "To construct a work of art is to re-construct the world of experience and the self. And thus a concept of the self emerges, through the act of creative recall [like the emotional reconstruction Lily employs] translated into a process of artistic creation, displaying characteristics of unity and continuity which could not be attributed to the self as given in immediate experience."²¹

CHAPTER III

ORLANDO

Orlando is a special problem. Most critics simply do not know what to make of it. As a result, Orlando is often just ignored¹ or dismissed as "a rest and a frolic."² Virginia Woolf's own comments in the Diary do not encourage serious consideration of the novel among her works. At one time, she refers to it as "a writer's holiday",³ and at another she says, "For the truth is I feel the need of an escapade after these serious poetic experimental books whose form is always so closely considered. I want to kick up my heels and be off. I want to embody all those innumerable little ideas and tiny stories which flash into my mind at all seasons. I think this will be great fun to write; and it will rest my head before starting the very serious, mystical poetical work which I want to come next."⁴

The problem, then, if we are not content with ignoring or dismissing it, is how to fit Orlando meaningfully into the pattern of her work. Clearly, it represents a digression of Virginia Woolf's artistic trend, yet it may be possible to see this digression as most relevant to all she wrote. If

we were to question what aspect of the book seems to condemn it in the eyes of critics, the answer could well be that it asks the reader to accept too much; it presents him with an impossible, if not ridiculous, situation, and asks him to take it very seriously. But, we have found, with both Mrs. Dalloway and To the Lighthouse, that Virginia Woolf frequently uses fantasy to achieve certain effects without marring the serious intention of the novels. And in all cases, what fantasy demands of the reader is a relaxation of the powers of belief. The difference with Orlando is that the fantasy is not a digression, nor a tone, rather it is the dominant element of the book. Whereas, in Mrs. Dalloway and To the Lighthouse the fantasy enhanced the main subject matter, in Orlando fantasy becomes the subject matter itself. Hence the main character lives for several hundred years, half that time spent as a man and the other half as a woman.

John Graham, in a closely-reasoned article on Orlando, argues that it is not too much fantasy, but the failure to sustain the fantasy that causes the downfall of Orlando. The pleasure of fantasy, he claims, derives from "the impossible abrogation of natural law," and to this pleasure, the "didactic or critical material is ancillary."⁵ But in fact, the author betrays her own method, because "as the work proceeded,

Virginia Woolf's interest in Orlando's voyage through the centuries became steadily more serious and less ironic, so that it vitiated the artistic integrity of the book, slowly undermining the fantastic frame thrown up so exuberantly at its beginning."⁶

Mr. Graham's interpretation seems to account for the confusion one feels at the end of the book, the sense of not knowing how to take it. The feeling that Virginia Woolf is trying to insert the book insidiously back into the world of reality is unavoidable. It is even possible to see the whole book as not an abrogation of natural law at all, but as a fantastic flight of imagination. Near the end we are told that Orlando's mind "regained the illusion of holding things within itself." (Orlando, 276) And she continues, "When this happened, Orlando heaved a sigh of relief, lit a cigarette, and puffed for a minute or two in silence. Then she called hesitantly, as if the person she wanted might not be there, "Orlando?" For if there are (at a venture) seventy-six different times all ticking in the mind at once, how many different people are there not - Heaven help us - all having lodgment at one time or another in the human spirit?" (276-77) Might it not be possible, then, to see all of Orlando's excursions into other eras as merely an illusion? For if her

mind lost the illusion of holding things within itself, then presumably it became contained by things. Merely to imagine oneself as a courtier in the time of Queen Elizabeth would thus result in the illusion of actually living that kind of existence. Slightly earlier we are told that "the most successful practitioners of the art of life, often unknown people by the way, somehow contrive to synchronize the sixty or seventy different times which beat simultaneously in every normal human system so that when eleven strikes, all the rest chime in unison, and the present is neither a violent disruption nor completely forgotten in the past." (274) In the first few chapters of the book, then, Orlando could simply have lost the ability to synchronize his thoughts of the past with his life in the present. Such considerations indeed reduce the effect of the fantasy.

Virginia Woolf admits herself that her focus shifted while she wrote Orlando. "I began it as a joke and went on with it seriously. Hence it lacks some unity," she says.⁷ And the serious elements intrude on the fantastic, as John Graham observes, to the detriment of the whole book. In the other two novels discussed the same serious and comic elements were present, but an equilibrium was maintained. The solitary traveller episode, in Mrs. Dalloway, though apparently

insignificant, was found to have a profound relationship to the themes of the novel. And in To the Lighthouse, although the serious intention of the communal experience of the dinner is unquestionable, it is related in terms which encourage entry into a fantastic world. In Orlando, however, it seems that Virginia Woolf loses her sense of balance. The serious themes become more demanding in the last chapter. The theme that has persisted throughout the entire book - the attempt to reconcile a literary reality with life itself - refuses to take second place to the fantasy, and it usurps the position formerly held by the delightful adventures of the bisexual Orlando.

The first chapter remains the most memorable with its fantastic account of the Great Frost, and of Orlando's love affair with Sasha, and here, the serious theme is non-existent. After its introduction in Chapter Two and its re-emergence in various contexts throughout the novel, it becomes the main topic of the last chapter. In Chapter Two, then, we are told that Orlando is a nobleman afflicted with a love of literature:

It was the fatal nature of this disease to substitute a phantom for reality, so that Orlando, to whom fortune had given every gift-plate, linen, houses, men-servants, carpets, beds in profusion - had only to open a book for the whole vast accumulation to turn to mist. The nine acres of stone which were his house vanished; one hundred and fifty indoor servants

disappeared; his eighty riding horses became invisible; it would take too long to count the carpets, sofas, trappings, china, plate, cruets, chafing dishes and other movables often of beaten gold, which evaporated like so much sea mist under the miasma. So it was, and Orlando would sit by himself, reading, a naked man. (70)

The theme is modulated when we learn of Orlando's personal religion, a literary one, "a faith of her own" in which "the letter S ... is the serpent in the Poet's Eden." (157), and when her search for life and a lover alternates with her attempts to enter the sanctum of the literary gatherings of the eighteenth century. The whole of the last chapter is concerned with the problem of making life into literature and with the questions of the validity of the process.

The serious theme of Orlando is the same as that of the two novels already discussed, so that the gap between them is not as great as it would appear to be. They are all, on their most profound levels, concerned with a quest for reality. In this respect, Orlando himself is very like the solitary traveller in Mrs. Dalloway who, imprisoned by his own mind, needs to feel there is something real outside him. For Orlando that reality keeps changing; it is one thing in the sixteenth century, another in the nineteenth. Yet Orlando persists in his/her search, always believing that there is something just eluding her which will solve the problem of reality. It seems that it is a perpetual search, for each time that she thinks

of giving up, "some random collocation of barns and trees or a haystack and a waggon presents us with so perfect a symbol of what is unattainable that we begin the search again." (195) At the end of the book she realizes the nature of the search that has obsessed her whole life:

'Haunted' she cried, suddenly pressing the accelerator. 'Haunted ever since I was a child. There flies the wild goose. It flies past the window out to sea. Up I jumped (she gripped the steering wheel tighter) and stretched after it. But the goose flies too fast. I've seen it, here - there - there - England, Persia, Italy. Always it flies fast out to sea and always I fling after it words like nets (here she flung her hand out) which shrivel as I've seen nets shrivel drawn on deck with only sea-weed in them; and sometimes there's an inch of silver - six words - in the bottom of the net. But never the great fish who lives in the coral groves.' (281-2)

At the end of the book, an ineffectual and rather mysterious solution to the problem seems to be provided by Shelmerdine, who, as a character also remains mysterious and ineffectual. As he leaps to the ground from his boat and the present time strikes, the wild goose flies off over his head. Now these passages clearly refer to the task of the artist in his attempts to capture reality. Orlando, like Lily Briscoe, is an artist wrestling with the problems of aesthetic form.

Virginia Woolf often speaks in the Diary of artistic creation in terms of netting some prey. When she finished The Waves she wrote, "Whether good or bad, it's done; and, as I certainly felt at the end, not merely finished, but rounded

off, completed, the thing stated - how hastily, how fragmentarily I know; but I mean that I have netted that fin in the waste of water which appeared to me over the marshes out of my window at Rodmell when I was coming to an end of To the Lighthouse." ⁸ But she often refers to something that is more than the artistic impulse in the same terms, of tracking down an elusive prey. For example, she says it is her nature, "always to follow, blindly, instinctively, with a sense of leaping over a precipice - the call of - the call of - now, if I write The Moths I must come to terms with these mystical feelings." ⁹ It seems, then, that Virginia Woolf used these terms to express not only the search for artistic form but for a more profound reality. When she speaks of this reality there is always the suggestion that it eludes her, it is something she cannot grasp, like "the great fish who lives in the coral groves" that Orlando tries to catch.

This is not to suggest that Orlando can be forced into fitting the pattern of her other novels by treating it more seriously than it would seem to warrant. For the tone of ironic mockery that pervades the book cannot be ignored. Although the same themes and the same methods as in the other novels are at work, they are always carried to absurdity in Orlando. Her interest in the difference between the masculine

and feminine approaches to life is therefore carried to extremes by having one hero/heroine explore them both. Similarly, a constant theme of the novels is the search for identity through the unification of the various aspects of a personality. But *Orlando* becomes a literal expression of this theme so that every aspect of her personality, perhaps only originally conceived of in imagination, becomes a separate self which she must live out:

For she had a great variety of selves to call upon, far more than we have been able to find room for, since a biography is considered complete if it merely accounts for six or seven selves, whereas a person may well have as many thousand. Choosing then, only those selves we have found room for, *Orlando* may now have called on the boy who cut the nigger's head down; the boy who strung it up again; the boy who sat on the hill.... (278)

The essential difference between this sort of treatment of the theme and the unification of the various selves of Mrs. Ramsay or Clarissa Dalloway lies in the attitude of detachment which characterizes *Orlando*. "What fantasy and irony have in common," John Graham says, "is the deliberate disengagement from life so striking in parody, which may be closer than any other form of irony to the psychic root of all ironic responses."¹⁰ It is this detachment that is the distinguishing quality of *Orlando*, that prevents us from taking the book too seriously, and that allows Virginia Woolf herself to be flippant about ideas which she treated elsewhere with gravity.

In an essay on "Phases of Fiction" Virginia Woolf commented on those artists who have the ability to hold things at a distance. To recover the sense of outline, she says, we "seek out the satirists and the fantastics, who stand aloof and hold the world at a distance and eliminate and reduce so that we have the satisfaction of seeing round things after being immersed in them." And she continues, "because of their detachment [the satirists and fantastics] write often as poets write, for the sake of the beauty of the sentence and not for the sake of its use, and so stimulate us to wish for poetry in the novel."¹¹ One of Virginia Woolf's main concerns, as we already know, was with the form that the novel of the future would take. And, we have seen, (p. 33) that the terms in which she describes this future novel which would move towards poetry and away from personality are the same as those in which she describes the satirists and the fantastics. Like them, the novelists of the future will concentrate on outline rather than detail, and will disregard the fact-recording power of the novel in order to explore more impersonal relationships of the mind, a concern which resembles poetry. The similarity of technique will thus guarantee that satire and fantasy will be able to play an important role in the future novel. To this extent, Orlando can be seen as an

experiment with various techniques that Virginia Woolf intended to use in the future.

Her comment on the different approaches taken by those who stand aloof and those who immerse themselves in things is significant for another reason. These two tendencies appear in Virginia Woolf's own work. On the one hand, her quest for reality demanded involvement, not detachment; it demanded that she immerse herself in these problems, for only in such commitment could they ever be solved. It is impossible to imagine, for example, Orlando having Mrs. Ramsay's rhapsodic vision of the lighthouse. But on the other hand, Virginia Woolf recognized the virtues of those who were able to distance the world. In such detachment the actual solution of worldly problems was irrelevant, and when Virginia Woolf herself uses it, she writes not to find anything, but "for the sake of the beauty of the sentence". The first trend, then, leads the author to metaphysical problems, and the second, to a fantastic world in which such problems are superfluous. Since the one approach requires involvement and the other detachment, each cancels out the other. If Virginia Woolf expresses in the novels this quest for reality and yet at the same time tries to maintain the detachment necessary for poetry, then she prevents the realization of the quest.

It is possible that Virginia Woolf herself recognized that the two approaches were contradictory. In a critical comment she made on Tristram Shandy she wrote:

There, one sees, is poetry changing easily and naturally into prose, prose into poetry. Standing a little aloof, Sterne lays his hands lightly upon imagination, wit, fantasy; and reaching high up among the branches where these things grow, naturally and no doubt willingly forfeits his right to the more substantial vegetables that grow on the ground. For, unfortunately, it seems true that some renunciation is inevitable. You cannot cross the narrow bridge of art carrying all its tools in your hands.¹²

But there remains another aspect of this detached approach to consider. John Graham says:

In disengaging from life, fantasy withdraws into a realm of libidinal fulfilment in which the conflict between fact and desire is momentarily annihilated, our sense of the facts serving only to sharpen the pleasure of ignoring them. Irony withdraws into a realm of intellectual contemplation, in which the disparity between fact and illusion is itself the object of contemplation, so that we are not involved in reconciling them. In both cases, the pleasure is one of release from what is fated in our experience; from the frustrations of desire and the contradictions of reason which we cannot escape in life. In irony we 'master' contradictions by exposing them; in fantasy we 'master' frustrations by ignoring them and reconstituting experience arbitrarily, to suit desire; and in both there is something inconclusive, evasive, and improvised.¹³

Fantasy and irony, then, possess a certain power of wish fulfilment. The recurring theme, we have found, in Mrs. Dalloway and in To the Lighthouse is the quest for a unifying experience which the seeker can identify as reality. Orlando is no exception, and in it the problem emerges as one of moulding the materials of life into literature. It is indeed

possible that the search for the unattainable, which Orlando speaks of, is what necessitates an illusory world. Even allowing for the element of ironic mockery, this idea emerges from Orlando's comment when she takes Mr. Pope home with her:

"Illusions are to the soul what atmosphere is to the earth. Roll up that tender air and the plant dies, the colour fades. The earth we walk on is a parched cinder. It is marl we tread and fiery cobbles scorch our feet. By the truth we are undone. Life is a dream. 'Tis waking that kills us. He who robs us of our dreams robs us of our life - (and so on for six pages if you will, but the style is tedious and may well be dropped." (184-85)

Although she protects herself with the detached tone of irony and fantasy in Orlando, Virginia Woolf is still asking the same questions. But here again the questions are carried to an extreme, and their effect nullified by absurdity:

Having asked then of man and of bird and the insects, for fish, men tell us, who have lived in green caves, solitary for years to hear them speak, never, never say, and so perhaps know what life is - having asked them all and grown no wiser, but only older and colder (for did we not pray once in a way to wrap up in a book something so hard, so rare, one could swear it was life's meaning?) back we must go and say straight out to the reader who waits a tiptoe to hear what life is - Alas, we don't know. (244)

In the Diary where the ironic mask is dropped, the same question appears time and time again: "I enjoy almost everything.

Yet I have some restless searcher in me. Why is there not a discovery in life? Something one can lay hands on and say 'This is it'? My depression is a harassed feeling. I'm looking: but that's not it - that's not it. What is it? And shall I die before I find it?"¹⁴

John Graham suggests that it is the encroaching of the serious elements upon the comic that eventually makes the fantasy ineffectual in Orlando. This fault suggests, he adds, "that in writing Orlando Virginia Woolf undertook something less frivolous than she had intended; that she was more profoundly engaged with serious matters than she wished; and that much of this engagement sprang from unconscious pressures which she actually resisted as far as she could."¹⁵ Now the serious matters come to the surface in all the novels as this search for the unattainable. But we have also seen in Mrs. Dalloway, in To the Lighthouse and even more so in Orlando that this search is futile. The sense of unity that the characters experience in Mrs. Dalloway and in To the Lighthouse is ineffectual and disintegrates. In Orlando there is an overt recognition of the impossibility of ever ending the search. From this point of view the fantasy can be seen as an escape from the necessity of answering these questions, and from the dread that there may be no answers. Even the

fact, for example, that Orlando lives for several hundred years is a way, through fantasy, of defeating the threat of death. In this respect, then, fantasy can create a world which satisfies the desires of the creator. But we have also seen that the escape into fantasy is an abandonment of the search, because the detachment necessary for such an escape prevents the involvement that might resolve such problems.

The technique has interesting psychological implications. C.G. Jung claims that many people who can find no satisfactory expression of spiritual impulses in any dogmatic creed, often will channel these impulses into a process known as 'individuation.' In this process, "they were unconsciously and yet unswervingly seeking a goal, which eventually defined itself as the quest of wholeness - the mysterious entity 'the whole man' - and which necessitated the forging of a link between the conscious and the unconscious aspects of the psyche. The experience could also be formulated as the finding of the God within or the full experience of the archetype of the self."¹⁶ Now part of this process involves the exploration of dreams, of fantasy life, and especially expression of this fantasy life in some creative way. The individual, Jung says, "must work on his material, describing, painting, or modelling it, striving by every means to bring it into a form where it can be contemplated and studied, and

its hidden meaning discerned."¹⁷ It is therefore possible to see the work of art as an expression of religious impulses. With someone like Virginia Woolf, for whom "the quest for wholeness" is so urgent, it is impossible to ignore the implications. And within this scheme, the tendency for her imagination to turn towards fantasy takes on new dimensions. It may be, then, that Orlando, rather than being pushed to the periphery of her work, should occupy a central position.

In the discussion of To the Lighthouse (Chapter II) we approached this quest for wholeness that Jung talks about from another angle: the quest for the self and its reconstruction through memory. We have also seen that this quest tends to formulate in the novel into a circular structure. The novel begins with a mind reflecting on itself and returns at the end, when all the contents of consciousness have been emptied, to this same mind. It is notable that this kind of structure seems to be lacking in Orlando. The movement of its plot is linear rather than circular and it does not leave the impression of a complete and self-contained whole, as, for example, To the Lighthouse does. Orlando is also conspicuously lacking in the significant moments which bring things together in both Mrs. Dalloway and To the Lighthouse. These moments, as we have seen in Chapter I, as part of the circular structure,

contribute to the unity of the novels. The detachment necessary for the fantasy of Orlando prevents the intensity that produces such moments. And in this respect the fantasy breaks down the unity of the book.

We cannot ignore that fantasy shoots over the top of problems with carefree abandonment. It encourages no opinion, and takes no stand. If "the author's attitude towards the reality of the world he represents" is an essential factor of the stylistic effect of the novel, then we can see this principle at work in Virginia Woolf.¹⁸ Near the end of the book Orlando goes shopping at Marshall and Snelgrove's: "Then she got into the lift, for the good reason that the door stood open; and was shot smoothly upwards. The very fabric of life now, she thought as she rose, is magic. In the eighteenth century, we knew how everything was done; but here I rise through the air; I listen to voices in America; I see men flying - but how it's done, I can't ever begin to wonder. So my belief in magic returns." (270) No wonder, then, in a world in which the very fabric of life is magic, that fantasy should be the natural way of expressing the experience. But in crossing "the narrow bridge of art", as Virginia Woolf herself has said, "some renunciation is inevitable". Orlando rides in the lift in a state of helplessness; the controlling

powers which influence her life remain shrouded in mystery .
She cannot even begin to wonder what they might be, and the
only choice left is to ride along resolving that such things
are not for her to know.

CHAPTER IV

THE WAVES

Thus when I come to shape here at this table between my hands the story of my life and set it before you as a complete thing, I have to recall things gone far, gone deep, sunk into this life or that, and become part of it; dreams, too, things surrounding me, and the inmates, those old half-articulate ghosts who keep up their hauntings by day and night; who turn over in their sleep, who utter their confused cries, who put out their phantom fingers and clutch at me as I try to escape - shadows of people one might have been; unborn selves.

(The Waves, 316-17)

Bernard's attempt in the last chapter of The Waves to make of his life "a complete thing" sets him on the quest taken by Mrs. Dalloway, Mrs. Ramsay and Orlando. In fact, all the characters of The Waves - Louis, Neville, Bernard, Rhoda, Jinny, Susan, - are involved in this quest in different ways. They must, individually, amalgamate their various selves; there is also the suggestion that if they can attain a moment of unity as a group, they will know who they are: the moment of revelation contains all knowledge. The problem of the unification of the individual, as T.S. Eliot has suggested, is a microcosm of a greater problem. It is in The Waves, "the serious mystical poetical work" which the author foresaw when writing Orlando that the central confrontation with "those mystical feelings" she spoke of in her Diary takes place.

On the technical level as well The Waves is a confrontation. It seems to be Virginia Woolf's attempt to write the novel of the future that she talked so much about. In "The Narrow Bridge of Art" she wrote something that seems to refer to a novel like The Waves:

And it is possible that there will be among the so-called novels one which we shall scarcely know how to christen. It will be written in prose, but in prose which has many of the characteristics of poetry. It will have something of the exaltation of poetry, but much of the ordinariness of prose. It will be dramatic, and yet not a play. It will be read, not acted. By what name we are to call it is not a matter of very great importance. What is important is ~~that~~ this book which we see on the horizon may serve to express some of those feelings which seem at the moment to be balked by poetry pure¹ and simple and to find the drama equally inhospitable to them.

The Waves has six characters who announce themselves in soliloquies at various stages of their lives from childhood to old age. They do not interact; they scarcely seem to be aware of one another except on an abstract level, and when they speak, they speak of themselves. The novel is really a succession of dramatic monologues, a "prose poem" (as Virginia Woolf herself often called it) that is concerned with expressing the feelings of the characters. We are usually aware of the outward events, but the main focus is always on the gropings of the mind beneath the restrictive level of habits. Events are always repetitive; what changes is the mind that reacts to them, and for the mind, everything is always new,

always changing. By examining how the minds of the characters react to events, and by conveying this reaction by an image that stands for itself, and reaches out beyond itself, Virginia Woolf frees herself from events. "My theory being," she had once written, "that the actual event practically does not exist - nor time either."²

The use of the images makes The Waves the most elaborately patterned of the novels. At the beginning the characters are identified by the imagery they use. Susan wraps her agony in her handkerchief; Rhoda rocks petals in a basin; Louis feels inferior because his father is a banker in Brisbane and he speaks with an Australian accent. The rest of the book improvises on these established images, always returning to the first subjects which act as points of reference. What we realize about these images is that in their various contexts they convey the nuances of emotion of the characters, emotions that can be conveyed in no other way; they are the images, and vice versa.

One thing that stands out in this analysis of emotion is the essential part played by fantasy. In this case, I mean by fantasy not the work of art itself, nor a wild flight of the imagination, but a basic psychological state, one that expresses itself as an image. This process not only finds its way into art, it is a common experience in the mind of every

human being. For example, a contemporary philosopher writes:

Among our fantasies there is usually something, at least, that will do as a metaphor, and this something has to serve just as the nearest word has to serve in a new verbal expression. An arriving train may have to embody nameless and imageless dangers coming with a rush to unload their problems before me. Under the pressure of fear and confusion and shrinking, I envisage the engine, and the pursuant cars of unknown content, as a first symbol to shape my unborn concepts. What the arriving train represents is the first aspect of those dangers that I can grasp. The function that literally means a railroad incident functions here in a new capacity, where its literal generality, its applicability to trains, becomes irrelevant, and only those features that can symbolize the approaching future - power, speed, inevitable direction (symbolized by the track), and so forth - remain significant. The fantasy here is a figure; a metaphor of wordless cognition.³

We can see this process in operation in the novel by examining one of the most interesting characters, Rhoda. One particular experience as a child emphasizes her feeling of isolation. It is a very simple and very common experience in the life of a child. Unable to do the math problems, she is left alone in the school room. She says, "I begin to draw a figure and the world is looped in it, and I myself am outside the loop; which I now join - so - and seal up, and make entire. The world is entire, and I am outside of it, crying, 'Oh, save me, from being blown for ever outside the loop of time!'" (21) Later on, we learn that Rhoda is afraid of figures. (26), and now the image carries with it the emotional connotations of the original experience. As the novel progresses we realize the feeling of isolation is a symptom of an identity crisis.

She continually feels the need to relieve her insecurity, to convince herself that she exists at all, by touching something hard. "Alone," she says, "I often fall down into nothingness. I must push my foot stealthily lest I should fall off the edge of the world into nothingness. I have to bang my hand against some hard door to call myself back to the body." (204) She continually fears disintegration, and feels that she is held together by something that might at any moment collapse:

There is some check in the flow of my being; a deep stream presses on some obstacle; it jerks; it tugs; some knot in the centre resists. Oh, this is pain, this is anguish! I faint, I fail. Now my body thaws; I am unsealed, I am incandescent. Now the stream pours in a deep tide fertilizing, opening the shut, forcing the tight-folded, flooding free. To whom shall I give all that now flows through me, from my warm, my porous body? I will gather my flowers and present them - Oh! to whom?" (60-61)

What we realize in retrospect about the fantasy of the original experience in the school room is that it reveals a unique psychological state in the character. The images and the fantasy generated by them become equivalents of this state. Rhoda is a type of the Clarissa Dalloway, Mrs. Ramsay figure, but with a significant difference. Rhoda is a failure; she never completes the quest as the other two do, and she is destroyed by her failure. At the end of the book we learn that she killed herself. One wonders how much she embodied the personality of her creator. There are two instances in

the novel when this conjecture seems true. Both are concerned with ordinary and insignificant experiences which become magnified as great crises:

Wind and storm coloured July. Also, in the middle, cadaverous, awful, lay the grey puddle in the courtyard, when, holding an envelope in my hand, I carried a message. I came to the puddle. I could not cross it. Identity failed me. We are nothing, I said, and fell. I was blown like a feather. I was wafted down tunnels. Then very gingerly, I pushed my foot across. I laid my hand against a brick wall. I returned very painfully, drawing myself back into my body over the grey, cadaverous space of the puddle. This is life then to which I am committed. (69)

and:

'There is the puddle,' said Rhoda, 'and I cannot cross it. I hear the rush of the great grindstone within an inch of my head. Its wind roars in my face. All palpable forms of life have failed me. Unless I can stretch and touch something hard, I shall be blown down the eternal corridors for ever. What, then, can I touch? What brick, what stone? and so draw myself across the enormous gulf into my body safely? (171-2)

In her diary the author once wrote:

Life is, soberly and accurately, the oddest affair; has in it the essence of reality. I used to feel this as a child - couldn't step across a puddle once, I remember, for thinking how strange - what am I?⁴

There is the suggestion in the novel, I have said, that if the six friends can attain the permanent moment together, their identity problems will be solved, and the quest for unity will be realized. Each character (with the exception of Susan and Jinny who are contented with their lot) envisages a time when he will experience a feeling of completeness. Louis says:

'The time approaches when these soliloquies shall be shared. We shall not always give out a sound like a beaten gong as one sensation strikes and then another. Children, our lives have been gongs striking; clamour and boasting; cries of despair; blows on the nape of the neck in gardens.

'Now grass and trees, the travelling air blowing empty spaces in the blue which they then recover, shaking the leaves which then replace themselves, and our ring here, sitting, with our arms binding our knees, hint at some other order, and better, which makes a reason everlastingly. This I see for a second, and shall try tonight to fix in words, to forge in a ring of steel.... (41-2)

All of the visions (if this is not a presumptuous term) have similar suggestions of the mystical. Neville, for example, says:

Yesterday, passing the open door leading into the private garden, I saw Fenwick with his mallet raised. The steam from the tea-urn rose in the middle of the lawn. There were banks of blue flowers. Then suddenly descended upon me the obscure, the mystic sense of adoration, of completeness that triumphed over chaos. Nobody saw my poised and intent figure as I stood at the open door. Nobody guessed the need I had to offer my being to one god; and perish, and disappear. His mallet descended; the vision broke. (55)

And Rhoda: "There is, then, a world immune from change. But I am not composed enough, standing on tiptoe on the verge of fire, still scorched by the hot breath, afraid of the door opening and the leap of the tiger, to make even one sentence." (115)

These moments, when they do occur in the novel, are put in somewhat less grandiose terms. On two occasions, once prior to the death of Percival at a dinner party in his honour, and once after his death, the friends experience

a communion of feeling that fixes the moment. At the dinner party Bernard says:

'We are drawn into this communion by some deep, some common emotion. Shall we call it, conveniently, "love"? Shall we say "love of Percival" because Percival is going to India?... We have come together ... to make one thing, not enduring - for what endures? - but seen by many eyes simultaneously. There is a red carnation in that vase. A single flower as we sat here waiting, but now a seven-sided flower, many petalled, red, puce, purple-shaded, stiff with silver-tinted leaves - a whole flower to which every eye brings its own contributions. (137)

The second moment is similar, but the absence of Percival is prominent:

'The flower,' said Bernard, 'the red carnation that stood in the vase on the table of the restaurant when we dined together with Percival is become a six-sided flower; made of six lives.'

'A mysterious illumination,' said Louis, 'visible against those yew trees.'

'Built up with much pain, many strokes,' said Jinny.

'Marriage, death, travel, friendship,' said Bernard; 'town, and country; children and all that; a many-sided substance cut out of this dark; a many-faceted flower. Let us stop for a moment; let us behold what we have made. Let it blaze against the yew trees. One life. There. It is over. Gone out.' (250)

Percival is a peculiar figure, and he wields an uncanny power over the lives of the six characters. This power really is the adhesive that fixes the moment in the restaurant, that makes the human communion a reality. His "intensity of being", Neville says, abolishes the normal. Percival rarely appears in the novel, never speaks, and yet he is talked about by everyone else. The six friends are obsessed with him.

Whatever he has, the others want. Part of his gift seems to be a kind of careless complacency that frees him from the painful introspection that the others subject themselves to. He strides through life with a "pagan indifference": "He sees nothing; he hears nothing. He is remote from us all in a pagan universe." (37) Perhaps it is just this indifference which it is impossible for the others to achieve. Bernard and his friends seem to need him to congeal their world; "Without Percival there is no solidity," they say. (132) Without him the six friends remain six solitudes seeking contact with the outer world of the Percival's. He seems to possess some secret that is forever beyond them. Bernard speaks of him as "a great master of the art of living." (169) His death, at twenty-five, is the crisis of their lives.

Besides this mysterious power there is another odd effect which results from his presence in the novel. In an article on Virginia Woolf, John Graham says that there are two steps to the appreciation of parody. By the first, we recognize the object as something known and familiar to us; this recognition is followed immediately by the recognition that the features are slightly distorted. "The lighter the distortion, the subtler the parody," says Mr. Graham.⁵

Percival is immediately recognizable as the hero figure. Everyone else in the novel takes him too seriously to

leave any doubt on this point. But as the story progresses, it becomes impossible for us to take him the least bit seriously. He would be, it seems, appropriately greasy for the lead in a grade 'B' movie. Percival is the conventional hero, as Virginia Woolf takes pains to point out. In the first restaurant scene, everyone waits for Percival's entrance, which Bernard describes in this way:

Here is Percival, ... smoothing his hair, not from vanity (he does not look in the glass), but to propitiate the god of decency. He is conventional; he is a hero. The little boys trooped after him across the playing-fields. They blew their noses as he blew his nose, but unsuccessfully, for he is Percival. Now, when he is about to leave us, to go to India, all these trifles come together. He is a hero. (133)

And later on, Bernard visualizes how the hero looks on his charger: "But now, behold, Percival advances; Percival rides a flea-bitten mare, and wears a sun-helmet. By applying the standards of the West, by using the violent language that is natural to him, the bullock-cart is righted in less than five minutes. The Oriental problem is solved. He rides on; the multitude cluster round him, regarding him as if he were - what indeed he is - a God." (147-8)

Percival emerges, it seems, as a perfect example of sublimity in the ridiculous. The author may just be having fun, or she may like parody, as Mr. Graham suggests, because of "sheer delight in imitation for the sake of imitation, and ridicule for the sake of ridicule."⁶ Her purpose, in my

opinion, is much more serious than this, and it becomes evident in the remarks of the characters after Percival's death. Neville says: "I am not going to lie down and weep away a life of care. (An entry to be made in my pocketbook; contempt for those who inflict meaningless death.) Further, this is important; that I should be able to place him in trifling and ridiculous situations, so that he may not feel himself absurd, perched on a great horse. I must be able to say, 'Percival, a ridiculous name.'" (166-7) This necessity to ridicule, to see the absurdity in life is our defence against this great monster, which threatens to destroy us totally. It is Neville's one defence against the sorrow caused by Percival's death, a sorrow which brings chaos to the order Percival seems to command.

It is important to see that this characterization of Percival has many similarities to the technique and to the theory that seems to underlie it, that the author used in Orlando. Like Orlando, Percival is a fantastic conception that possesses all the qualities, and achieves all the effects of parody. We have seen from the study of To the Lighthouse and of Orlando that the effects of fantasy and parody tend to be the same, and that neither can be dismissed as merely an extraneous element in the novels. Invariably, we have found that the fantasy (and I include parody in this term) serves

either to create in imagination what the author fears does not exist in reality, or to provide some compensation to the disillusioned imagination. The expressions of fantasy which tend towards parody, as does Percival, seem to possess these compensatory qualities. It is in his dual function as a figure of wish-fulfilment and of absurdity that his significance becomes clear. Percival offers to the other characters what seems to be the ideal way of life; he solves the problems, he brings order. At the same time, he is slightly ludicrous; he possesses none of their complexity; he strides through life because he never questions it, never tries to understand it. And when he is gone, and the order he seems to offer with him, the only consolation for his six admirers is to emphasize his absurdity, for, ultimately, he has brought only the illusion of order.

Chronologically, Orlando stands between To the Lighthouse and The Waves, and it is quite possible that Virginia Woolf let the technique of fantasy that she had begun in To the Lighthouse run wild in Orlando to discover its possibilities, its range of effects. By the time she writes The Waves the technique is mastered; it is omnipresent, but handled with such a subtle touch that it scarcely seems to be there.

In all four novels we have studied, death has been the enemy. In Virginia Woolf's world it is the experience of the

timeless moment, the moment of unity, that can offset the experience of death. In their different ways, these are the only two permanent things that human beings can experience. But it is questionable whether this moment of unity actually exists, or whether Virginia Woolf herself even believed it did. In all the novels death seems to win the game. Percival's death is related in the chapter immediately following the attainment of the moment of unity. And later on, Rhoda says, "Percival, by his death, has made me this present, has revealed this terror, has left me to undergo this humiliation - faces and faces, served out like soup-plates by scullions; coarse, greedy, casual; looking in at shop-windows with pendant parcels; ogling, brushing, destroying everything, leaving even our love impure, now touched by their dirty fingers."

(173) The effect of the juxtaposition of the moment of unity and of his death is, of course, to obliterate the value of the former. Percival seemed to be the focal point for the love of the friends, and by the strength of their realization of their common love for him, he offered a moment when the confines of personality were broken, when all human love seemed to merge in one stream. But this love is destroyed by his death; it is made impure. The second time they experience this feeling they recognize that it blazes for only a moment; it is only "a wedge of darkness," and it must return to the darkness.

"The tree alone resisted our eternal flux," says Bernard in his long final statement of the novel. And this tree, we recognize from the image pattern of the book, is "the immitigable apple tree" that forms the central image of the fantasy Neville's mind creates in reaction to his childhood experience of death. He says:

The apple-tree leaves became fixed in the sky; ... He was found in the gutter. His blood gurgled down the gutter. His jowl was white as a dead codfish. I shall call this stricture, this rigidity, 'death among the apple trees' for ever.... There was an obstacle. 'I cannot surmount this unintelligible obstacle,' I said. And the others passed on. But we are doomed, all of us, by the apple trees, by the immitigable tree which we cannot pass. (24)

And when Percival dies Neville says, "All is over. The lights of the world have gone out. There stands the tree which I cannot pass." (163) The image, then, of this fantasy experience becomes part of the emotional reconstruction of Neville's character. (He himself says that he will try to "recover ... what I felt when I heard about the dead man through the swing-door last night." [23-4]) The image also implies the quest theme of the novel, for it is death that opposes the unity the characters seek. We can now see, therefore, how the fantasy - unity themes of this novel, and of the others, operate. The attempt to create in imagination what she fears does not exist in reality leads the author to adopt this method of emotional reconstruction based on fantasy

experiences of the characters. The emotional reconstruction is the meeting-point of both the technical and the thematic aspects of the novels; for the images of fantasy work towards the moment of unity that the characters seek, the moment when they will know their own identity and the relationship of this identity to an impersonal but somehow meaningful reality. The technical level, it now seems, implies the thematic, and the fantasy can be seen as a metaphor of the unity quest of the novels.

Bernard as well illustrates this synthesis of technique and theme. It is his character that becomes synonymous with bubbles rising, words forming, story telling; "so that instead of incoherence there is perceived a wandering thread." (52) He is the artist-unifier, who rises on words, who sees a story everywhere so that "we melt into each other with phrases. We are edged with mist." (14-15) "If I find myself in company with other people," he says, "words at once make smoke rings ... I do not believe in separation ... (we are not single, we are one.)" (72-3) Yet his search for unity, his phrase-making gift that he bears to his friends is jeopardized by the medium. The passage from life to art is a treacherous one. And his search for unity must also be the search for the perfect phrase "that fits this very moment exactly." (74) Although this artistic need of his to find sequences everywhere

condemns him to a life-long quest, it also frustrates the quest. For as the novel progresses Bernard begins to question whether he actually makes sequences at all, or simply creates a "veil of words for everything." "What am I?" he says. "There is no stability in this world. Who is to say what meaning there is in anything? Who is to foretell the flight of a word? It is a balloon that sails over tree-tops. To speak of knowledge is futile. All is experiment and adventure. We are for ever mixing ourselves with unknown quantities. What is to come? I know not." (127-8) In the last section of the novel his doubt in the validity of the quest wins out, and he says "I have done with phrases. How much better is silence." (323)

Bernard, like Lily Briscoe, forsakes knowledge for the unity that human love offers. But it is questionable whether the confrontation of the mystical feelings in The Waves leaves much faith in even human love. For it is Bernard who makes the first statement on the communion of love in the restaurant. Yet Bernard comes to recognize his vision as simply a veil. It is also Bernard who makes the final statement of the novel, the long chapter in which he looks back over the lives of the six friends and tries, for the last time, to make of it "a complete thing". The mood that dominates this entire chapter is one of doubt and defeat. At bottom lies the fear that if

there are no stories to tell, perhaps life is so diffuse, so far beyond our blind gropings, that we can know nothing at all. "Life had been imperfect," he admits, "an unfinished phrase. It had been impossible for me ... to keep coherency." (310)

This image of the artist throws light on another problem. I spoke earlier of the personal quality of the symbolic associations of the lighthouse. They invite interpretation but they never work out to any satisfactory answers. Virginia Woolf retains essentially the same symbolic method in The Waves. She has written:

What interests me in the last stage was the freedom and boldness with which my imagination picked up, used and tossed aside all the images, symbols which I had prepared. I am sure that this is the right way of using them - not in set pieces, as I had tried at first, coherently, but simply as images, never making them work out; only suggest. Thus I hope to have kept the sound of the sea and the birds, dawn and garden subconsciously present, doing their work under ground.⁷

We feel that Virginia Woolf herself does not see this heightened reality that all the visions point to. She sits, like Mrs. Ramsay, dealing out little tastes of perfection, but never treating us to the whole dish. We are tempted with experiences that "partake of eternity", with moments that go to make "the thing that remains for ever after." But when we demand other examples of this eternity, she can only point again to what she has told us in these puzzling visions. "What does

the central shadow hold?" Bernard says, "Something? Nothing? I do not know." (319) It seems that her own intellect, creating in an intensely personal world, a world which she herself apprehends with grave doubts, is her only system. Yet, for her there is no other way, no other life. What she has created for herself, like Bernard, is a state of intellectual and artistic solipsism. She must meet life on her own terms, and these terms affirm only the central shadow:

I stray and look and wonder, and sometimes, rather furtively, try to rise on the shaft of somebody else's prayer into the dome, out, beyond, wherever they go. But then like the lost and wailing dove, I find myself failing, fluttering, descending and perching upon some curious gargoyle, some battered nose or absurd tombstone, with humour, with wonder, and so again watch the sight-seers with their Baedekers shuffling past, while the boy's voice soars in the dome and the organ now and then indulges in a moment of elephantine triumph. How then, I asked, would Louis roof us all in? How would he confine us, make us one, with his red ink, with his very fine nib? The voice petered out in the dome, wailing." (309)

CHAPTER V

BETWEEN THE ACTS

Between the Acts, Virginia Woolf's last novel, is essentially a recognition of defeat. It is a novel about a failure in communication and a failure of vision. The one who fails, the anti-heroine, is Miss La Trobe. On her lies the burden of creation. As writer and director of the pageant she is the by now familiar artist-figure who strives to create and to communicate an experience of aesthetic unity. Yet what she continually feels during the presentation of the pageant is not the fullness of success but the disintegration of illusion, and for her, this meant death. Success for her depends on the continuity of the emotion presented by the pageant and on the willingness of the audience to surrender themselves to the emotion. Any break in the continuity, or the constant resistance of the audience can cause failure:

Now Miss La Trobe stepped from her hiding. Flowing, and streaming on the grass, on the gravel, still for one moment she held them together - the dispersing company. Hadn't she, for twenty-five minutes, made them see? A vision imparted was relief from agony ... for one moment ... one moment. Then the music petered out on the last word we. She heard the breeze rustle in the branches. She saw Giles Oliver with his back to the audience. Also Cobbet of Cobbs Corner. She hadn't made them see. It was a failure, another damned failure! As usual. Her vision escaped her. (Between the Acts, 117-118)

What exactly Miss La Trobe wants to accomplish never becomes clear. Perhaps the failure to communicate means that she herself does not understand her vision completely. Whatever her message, somehow the pageant speaks for it; the pageant is the message. And it is significant that the pageant holds the audience, holds us, together in a way that time cannot. Of the five novels discussed in this thesis only Orlando and Between the Acts lack the timeless moments. In both novels what we have instead is a parody of the theme that the author takes ultimately seriously in the other novels. As we have seen in Orlando the main character becomes the instrument of parody. In Between the Acts the pageant presents a series of parodies of history which are, paradoxically, more distanced and more involving than the other earlier works. The presentation of a succession of plays within a novel removes the dramatic impact from us, especially when, in the Elizabethan age, we are shown a play within a play within a novel. We, the audience, are watching another audience. The audience we are watching recognizes the actors, laughs when they forget their lines, or when their costumes disintegrate on stage. This informality diminishes the dramatic effect of the production, but it also increases the effect on us; for, knowing and recognizing the performers, the audience feels almost as though they could play the parts themselves. In the act of

seeing through the production, we, and the audience in the novel, are actually becoming part of it.

This technique of making something immediately recognizable to decrease dramatic effect, while by the same token involving the audience more is the one that Virginia Woolf uses in her presentation of the plays within the novel. The Elizabethan, Restoration, and Victorian ages are immediately recognizable, (and also easily parodied) because they can be reduced to clichés. The age of empire, of "purity and security", of "prosperity and respectability", of an altruistic concern for our fellow man, and for the souls of the heathen, with an equal concern for the mating of unclaimed daughters with eligible bachelors, preferably clergymen; all these phrases lampoon the Victorian years. These clichés both pinpoint and criticize the age, in the same way as the audience identify themselves with the age, and feel slightly embarrassed because of it. Like this lady, they squirm: "'Tut-tut-tut,' Mrs. Lynn-Jones expostulated. 'There were grand men among them ... 'Why she did not know, yet somehow she felt that a sneer had been aimed at her father; therefore at herself.'" (191-192) She is involuntarily involved because the Victorian age is, in a sense, her age.

In a way, then, the pageant is a substitute for the

quest for the eternal moment in the other novels, yet as a substitute, and a fantastic one, it retains essentially the same quest theme. The difference is that it openly acknowledges the illusion. It initiates the quest not in the name of mystical feelings, but in the name of fantasy. And the end result is that it contains the qualities of both. This book gives us a world that exists halfway between fact and fantasy. It presents us with an image of the history of mankind, yet the image is slightly distorted. It is both factual and free of the limitations of fact. It is not always easy to distinguish between the two, like Mrs. Swithin, for example:

It took her five seconds in actual time, in mind time ever so much longer, to separate Grace herself, with blue china on a tray, from the leather-covered grunting monster who was about, as the door opened, to demolish a whole tree in the green steaming undergrowth of the primeval forest. Naturally, she jumped, as Grace put the tray down and said: 'Good Morning, Ma'am.' 'Batty,' Grace called her, as she felt on her face the divided glance that was half meant for a beast in a swamp, half for a maid in a print frock and white apron. (13-14)

What the pageant does, in fact, is to attempt to create the illusion of unity, in this case, of the oneness of all mankind. We have seen in all the other novels that this concept is used not only in an aesthetic sense, but also in a mystical one. Behind all the experiences of unity that the novels seek to convey lies the attempt to formulate a mystical experience, one which is not orthodox in any sense, but entirely personal. Mrs. Ramsay expresses only indignation when

she involuntarily lets an insincerity slip in among the truths and says, "We are in the hands of the Lord." Clarissa Dallo-way finds the religion of Joyce Kilman a power-hungry and hypocritical threat. In The Waves Neville rebels against Dr. Crane who presides over the chapel service: "The brute men-aces my liberty," said Neville, "when he prays.... The words of authority are corrupted by those who speak them. I gibe and mock at this sad religion." (The Waves, 198) And in Between the Acts the impossibility of a reconciliation between a private and an orthodox view is seen in Bart and his sister, Lucy Swithin. While she wears a cross, "the usual trappings of old age" (15) and leaves everything, even the weather, to the will of God, Bart relies on human initiative. When the sky looks cloudy before the pageant begins, Lucy suggests that they pray that it will not rain; Bart feels that they would get better results by supplying umbrellas. He cannot understand how his sister can be taken in by all this hocus-pocus: But it was not in books the answer to his question - why, in Lucy's skull, shaped so much like his own, there existed a prayable being? She didn't, he supposed, invest it with hair, teeth or toenails. It was, he supposed more of a force or a radiance, controlling the thrush and the worm; the tulip and the hound; and himself, too, an old man with swollen veins.... The love, he was thinking, that they should give to flesh and blood they give to the church.... (32-33)

This contempt for the well-trodden path of religion is not an accidental digression in the novels. Indeed, Virginia

Woolf's concern to expose the complacency, the short-comings, and the limitations of a religious interpretation of reality amounts almost to a fanaticism. In almost every novel, she either pokes fun at religion and those who practise it, or her criticism takes a more vicious form, like the wooden, absurd, yet frightening characters of Joyce Kilman and of Dr. Crane. Ironically though, Virginia Woolf seeks the eternal as fervently as any evangelist. Her personal concern with those mystical feelings has been illustrated time and again in excerpts from her diary. And all her heroes and heroines take up this quest in her name. But, forbidden to conform, they are thrown back on their own resources in an alien and chaotic world. Mr. Ramsay takes the way of philosophy, yet despairs in his ability to reach only Q. Clarissa Dalloway and Mrs. Ramsay both have some intuitive faculty that enables them intuitively to order their experience. Everyone must give shape to the amorphous substance of life which batters at his senses. We all 'make life'; we construct our own systems, according to The Waves. Just how individual these systems are can be seen in the various outlooks analyzed in The Waves. Each of the six characters opposes the chaos and rides the monster, life, in his own way. In geometrical terms, each one takes a square and puts it upon an oblong so that he constructs his own dwelling-place.

But there is a great flaw in this process. The moment that we set an oblong on the square we are committing ourselves. Louis, the business-man, brings order to the world through commerce. Susan depends on nature, "demands that life shall sheathe its claws," and do no harm to those she loves. The danger is that we will fall into self-created ruts and submit to the temporal. Each person must make his own life which is different from everyone else's life; consequently, he loses contact and cannot communicate with others. The very system that he constructs becomes part of a fleeting and changing world. Death seems to be the only thing that brings continuity and permanence. He yearns for some alternative, something that will counteract the senselessness of death. Yet this alternative must be found within the bounds of human life. That is the meaning of all the attempts to "fix the moment", to find a moment within time, when time stands still.

In a very real sense this is just what the creator of a work of art does; Miss La Trobe, for example, in her attempt to give objective form to a moment of eternity, to draw all the scraps and fragments into one unified whole. Everyone, not just the artist, is engaged in the task in his own way; yet as long as the task continues there will be two camps: the unifiers and the separatists. Lucy Swithin, wielding her cross, is a unifier:

Mrs. Swithin caressed her cross. She gazed vaguely at the view. She was off, they guessed, on a circular tour of the imagination - one-making. Sheep, cows, grass, trees, ourselves - all are one. If discordant, producing harmony - if not to us, to a gigantic ear attached to a gigantic head. And thus - she was smiling benignly - the agony of the particular sheep, cow, or human being is necessary; and so - she was beaming seraphically at the gilt vane in the distance - we reach the conclusion that all is harmony, could we hear it. And we shall. Her eyes now rested on the white summit of a cloud. Well, if the thought gave her comfort, William and Isa smiled across her, let her think it. (204)

Bartholomew, however, stands on the opposing side. His rational, practical and doubting nature saves him from any trust in supernatural forces:

He looked sardonically at Lucy, perched on her chair. How, he wondered, had she ever borne children?

For all are dancing, retreating and
advancing,
The moth and the dragon fly

She was thinking, he supposed, God is peace. God is love. For she belonged to the unifiers; he to the separatists. (140)

On the side of the unifiers we could place Mrs. Ramsay, Lily Briscoe, Bernard; for the separatists, Rhoda, Mr. Ramsay, Charles Tansley. In fact, all the novels could be read in terms of a conflict between these two opposing forces.

It is no accident, then, that every novel contains an artist-figure, one who is compelled to follow the quest for unity. And it is probably the power of unification that attracts Virginia Woolf to religion, however negative her attitude toward that subject might be. The unifiers seem to

be the minority, and Miss La Trobe's private battle is fought against the greatest odds. It is significant that when she does succeed, when she does unify, it is not with words (Bernard has exposed words as a veil) but with music:

Feet crunched the gravel. Voices chattered. The inner voice, the other voice was saying: How can we deny that this brave music, wafted from the bushes, is expressive of some inner harmony? 'When we wake' (some were thinking) 'the day breaks us with its hard mallet blows.' 'The office' (some were thinking) 'compels disparity. Scattered, shattered, hither thither summoned by the bell. 'Ping-ping-ping' that's the phone. 'Forward!' 'Serving!' - that's the shop.'...

For I hear music, they were saying. Music wakes us. Music makes us see the hidden, join the broken. Look and listen. (142-143)

But more often, it is the opposing forces that have the control, and Miss La Trobe's moments of supremacy are precarious:

Every moment the audience slipped the noose; split up into scraps and fragments. (p. 145) ... The music chanted: Dispersed are we. It moaned: Dispersed are we. It lamented: Dispersed are we, as they streamed, spotting the grass with colour, across the lawns, and down the paths: Dispersed are we.... 'Dispersed are we,' Isabella followed her, humming. 'All is over. The wave has broken. Left us stranded, high and dry. Single separate on the shingle.' (115)

And the last pronouncement of the gramophone witnesses the fate of the pageant: "The gramophone gurgled Unity - Dispersity. It gurgled Un ... dis ... And ceased." (235)

And Miss La Trobe's meaning, (and I have suggested that even for her it may have been obscure) is somehow bound up with the image she sets before us of present time, which is our image, faces reflected in mirrors:

She wanted to expose them, as it were, to douche them, with present-time reality. But something was going wrong with the experiment. 'Reality too strong,' she muttered.... (209)

Out they leapt, jerked, skipped. Flashing, dazzling, dancing, jumping. Now old Bart ... he was caught. Now Manresa. Here a nose ... There a skirt ... Then trousers only ... Now perhaps a face.... Ourselves? But that's cruel. To snap us as we are, before we've had time to assume ... And only, too, in parts.... That's what's so distorting and upsetting and utterly unfair. (214)

For every other age she has depicted, Miss La Trobe has been able to find an image, a cliché that contains its meaning.

But for present time there are simply a thousand different faces - all separate, all different. There is no one image, symbol, or cliché that will do for the age. The key word is multiplicity. For every glimpse of a meaning there are a dozen others that can challenge it. There are as many meanings as there are minds to contemplate them.

The Reverend Streatfield's interpretation is inadequate, yet he speaks for the unifiers. "To me at least it was indicated," he says, "that we are members one of another. Each is part of the whole.... Scraps, orts, and fragments! Surely we should unite?" (224-225) Presumably Miss La Trobe shows her disapproval by not appearing at the end of his speech when The Reverend wishes to thank someone. Her meaning, then, must be something quite different, and perhaps it lies not in the unity of all mankind of all time, but in the disparity the pageant shows between this present age and all

others. This age alone has nothing to unify it, no common belief like that of "purity and security" to draw its multiplicity of parts together. Its image is isolation, change, inability to communicate, insecurity. At the same time there is beneath everything else in the novel the undaunted faith that someday things will be clear. Miss La Trobe goes on creating and objectifying her visions in spite of her failure. Lucy Swithin, who gains our sympathy perhaps more than anyone else, never doubts the certainty of a revelation. And even Isa, who is much more of a separatist than a unifier, asks:

Do we know each other? Not here, not now. But somewhere, this cloud, this crust, this doubt, this dust - She waited for a rhyme, it failed her; but somewhere surely one sun would shine and all, without a doubt, would be clear. (76)

It is certain that it was Virginia Woolf's fate never to conquer her great tormentor, Doubt. This impulse seems to have balanced her desire for unity. It is significant that her use of fantasy is the best method for expressing this doubt. Mr. Graham, as quoted earlier (p. 56) has said that fantasy leaves the impression of the inconclusive, the evasive, the improvised. We have seen that this technique is one consistent aspect of the imagination in an artist who was constantly changing. It was perhaps the only 'system' that she allowed herself to adopt. Yet with its freedom, fantasy also brought an arbitrary order - that of illusion. However often

the author in the visions was able to annihilate momentarily the conflict between fact and desire, the world of fact still had to be confronted and momentary swishes of the fantastic wand did not make her invulnerable. Like Miss La Trobe, we are destined for disillusion when the vision dissolves.

The solitary traveller episode in Mrs. Dalloway, as I have suggested, can be seen as an image of the author's spiritual state that applies to all the novels. Atheists, this mini-myth suggests, are those who think that nothing exists outside themselves. This is why, of course, the boundaries and limitations of personality become unbearable to her characters. In order to relieve their spiritual claustrophobia they all try to establish contact with some reality greater than themselves. One recalls, though, Clarissa Dalloway's attitude of doubt, her refusal to see things in only one way, her belief that an intuitive, not a rational approach was the only valid one to take in life. I also pointed out at the time that Mrs. Ramsay's vision of the lighthouse makes sense only as an emotional, and not an intellectual experience. It is easy to see how an emotional apprehension of reality became the substitute for the real quest, how fantasy provided the images for the emotional analysis and reconstruction. In this context, The Waves constitutes the height of Virginia Woolf's achievement, the most perfect union of vehicle and message.

Yet it was impossible for her to ignore the fact that the means she had chosen to achieve the desired unity were illusory. Near the end of her life she had written in the Diary: "And the faculty for seeing in imagination always leaves me so suffused with something partly visual, partly emotional, I can't, though it's very pervasive, catch it when I come home."¹

Between the Acts is also an acknowledgement of her own defeat, of her realization that her vision was essentially hollow at the core. Yet there is the peculiar affinity between Miss La Trobe's vision of her new play:

There was the high ground at midnight; there the rock; and two scarcely perceptible figures. Suddenly the tree was pelted with starlings. She set down her glass. She heard the first words. (248)

and the end of the novel:

Isa let her sewing drop. The great hooded chairs had become enormous. And Giles too. And Isa too against the window. The window was all sky without colour. The house had lost its shelter. It was night before roads were made, or houses. It was the night that dwellers in caves had watched from some high place among rocks.

Then the curtain rose. They spoke. (256)

The suggestion is unmistakable that they will speak the first words that Miss La Trobe hears, the first words of her new play. Her vision, then, will become reality. Virginia Woolf herself is between the acts, waiting for the moment when her vision would become one with reality, when she would really

catch the thing she had to say. Until that moment of fulfilment she must remain with the voice of fantasy between the acts, like Orlando in the lift thinking that all is magic, or like Mrs. Swithin by the lily pool: "Above, the air rushed; beneath was water. She stood between two fluidities, caressing her cross." (239)

FOOTNOTES

FOOTNOTES

Chapter One

- ¹ Woolf, A Writer's Diary, 102.
- ² Ibid., 61.
- ³ Woolf, Mrs. Dalloway, Modern Library, vi.
- ⁴ Woolf, A Writer's Diary, 57.
- ⁵ Woolf, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown", 91.
- ⁶ Woolf, A Writer's Diary, 60-61.
- ⁷ Johnstone, The Bloomsbury Group, 339.
- ⁸ Eliot, "Religion Without Humanism", 112.
- ⁹ Woolf, A Writer's Diary, 132.

Chapter Two

- ¹ Humphrey, Stream of Consciousness in the Modern Novel, 86 and 101.
- ² Frye, The Educated Imagination, 11.
- ³ Bayley, Characters of Love, 36.
- ⁴ Ibid., 37.
- ⁵ Woolf, "Phrases of Fiction", 135.
- ⁶ Daiches, Virginia Woolf, 40.
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ Ibid., 86.
- ⁹ Graham, "Time in the Novels of Virginia Woolf", 191.
- ¹⁰ Frye, The Anatomy of Criticism, 92.

¹¹Humphrey, Stream of Consciousness in the Modern Novel, 102.

¹²Woolf, A Writer's Diary, 101.

¹³Ibid., 137.

¹⁴Ibid., 102.

¹⁵Woolf, "The Narrow Bridge of Art", 18-19.

¹⁶Meyerhoff, Time in Literature, 37.

¹⁷Johnstone, The Bloomsbury Group, 35.

¹⁸Forster, Aspects of the Novel, 100.

¹⁹Ibid., 105.

²⁰Graham, "The 'Caricature Value' of Parody and Fantasy in Orlando", 358.

²¹Meyerhoff, Time in Literature, 48.

Chapter Three

¹Schaefer, The Three-fold Nature of Reality in the Novels of Virginia Woolf.

²Johnstone, The Bloomsbury Group.

³Woolf, A Writer's Diary, 124.

⁴Ibid., 105.

⁵Graham, "The 'Caricature Value' of Parody and Fantasy in Orlando", 359.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Woolf, A Writer's Diary, 128.

⁸Ibid., 169.

⁹Ibid., 137.

¹⁰Graham, 'The 'Caricature Value' of Parody and Fantasy in Orlando', 358.

¹¹Woolf, "Phases of Fiction", 140.

¹²Woolf, "The Narrow Bridge of Art", 21-22.

¹³Graham, 'The 'Caricature Value' of Parody and Fantasy in Orlando', 358-9.

¹⁴Woolf, A Writer's Diary, 86.

¹⁵Graham, 'The 'Caricature Value' of Parody and Fantasy in Orlando', 346-7.

¹⁶~~Fordham~~ An Introduction to Jung's Psychology, 76.

¹⁷Ibid., 82.

¹⁸Auerbach, Mimesis, 472.

Chapter Four

¹Woolf, "The Narrow Bridge of Art", 18.

²Woolf, A Writer's Diary, 102.

³Langer, Philosophy in a New Key, 147.

⁴Woolf, A Writer's Diary, 101.

⁵Graham, 'The 'Caricature Value' of Parody and Fantasy in Orlando', 350.

⁶Ibid., 351.

⁷Woolf, A Writer's Diary, 169.

Chapter Five

¹Woolf, A Writer's Diary, 334.

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